

by Graeme Ewens

## SEKOUBA "BAMBINO" DIABATE

Manding music swings, and with it swings the name Diabate. There are so many prominent musicians called Diabate/Jobarteh that in West Africa countries where Manding culture thrives, the name is a byword for musical heritage. Sekouba "Bambino" Diabate has an extra edge: He is a natural singer and a popular phenomenon, with good looks, a baseball cap, a contemporary sound and a musical pedigree with the legendary Bambeya Jazz. He is being introduced to the international market at a key point of his career, under the distinctive name "Bambino."

The biggest act in Guinea, picked for international exposure by hot-shot producer Ibrahim Sylla, Bambino is on a roll. He has a new cd released by Stern's, a promo visit to New York and plans for an extensive European tour. On the album *Kasso*, Bambino shows he has more depth than the average electro-griot. His melange of musical styles ranges from crisp, bright, pan-African pop to solid, funky interpretations of classical or folklore pieces, with some mellow acoustic moments.

Both his parents were griots (oral historians) but "griots and musicians are not necessarily the same thing," explains Bambino. "I have the advantage of being both. I am a singer and a hereditary griot. On my album I am in a position to show both sides of my abilities." He also plays ngoni, guitar and percussion. But it is his singing which has most impressed. According to musicologist Lucy Duran, who specializes in the music of that region: "He is 'all voice.' If he was European he would have been a top opera singer." Indeed, to Western ears Bambino can sound warmer and more throaty than the drier tones of some of his peers.

Sekouba Bambino was born in 1967 near Siguiri in northern Guinea, close to the border of Mali. He started singing publicly at the age of eight with a local outfit called the Revolution Band before he went full-time professional with the state-sponsored "federal" orchestra Manden Kono. In 1979, at the ripe age of 12, he won the prize for best singer at a national festival for arts and culture in the capital, Conakry.

In 1982 Bambino was called up to join Bambeya Jazz National, the official band and propaganda arm of the Marxist party-of-state. Bambeya would have been world famous if they had been allowed to travel in the so-called "free world" during the 1960s and '70s. Their



biggest star had been the vocalist and composer Aboubacar Demba Camara, who died in a car crash in 1973, following which they faded from view for several years before returning spectacularly at the 1977 FESTAC festival. Another major reshuffle in the early 1980s saw

Bambino among 10 new recruits to the band.

"It was the President himself, Sekou Touré, who called me to join Bambeya Jazz," recalls Bambino. He sent a telegram to me, and the minister of culture came to my house with Ashken Kaba, the *chef d'orchestre* of Bambeya."

Under the totalitarian regime of Sekou Touré, Guinea had, since independence from France in 1958, become a closed society. Before Zaire, Guinea had embraced the philosophy of *authenticité*, which gave great impetus and status to musicians. One of the country's main allies was Cuba, whose music had already made a strong impact on Africa. Cuban and Congo rumba were popular, but for political reasons Guinean bands were obliged to incorporate more traditional music.

Culture was seen as an essential unifying force, and the state-run orchestras were formed in each administrative region to provide

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social entertainment and also to enforce the cultural identity and variety of the country. A powerful radio station broadcast music from Conakry across the region. Musicians had to be versatile showmen, while the griot tradition also brought social responsibilities.

Sekou Touré died in 1984 and, under a new regime, the country continued the liberalization policies which would bring it back into the international fold. This permitted Bambino's first European tour in 1985, which took them to France, Holland, Germany and Britain, where the young Bambino was introduced as the heir to Camara's legacy.

As the lead singer Bambino brought a new lease on life to the band, recording four albums with them and becoming a vocal star to equal the celebrated Bambey guitar, Sekou "Diamond Fingers" Diabate. He also picked up valuable studio experience with session work in Paris and Abidjan.

By the end of the 1980s Bambey was seen as too old fashioned for the vibrant pop culture opened up by regional superheros such as N'Dour, Keita, Kanté, Maal, Sangaré, etc. In 1990 Bambino made his first solo move with the release of a cassette titled *Sama* (the Elephant).

The following year, he formed his own group of seven "new generation" musicians and cut his second cassette album, *Le Destin*. Singing about his own destiny to become a star, the prophetic song emphasized his position as a popular hero. He claims the album sold over 600,000 copies, and that he was satisfactorily imbursed. That year he played 20 concerts at the Palais de Peuple in Conakry as well as touring in Gambia, Senegal, Mali, and in Belgium, Holland and France.

His next release in 1992 was a dedication to the Guinean team in the African Nations football cup. In 1993 he doubled the number of hometown concerts and also found time to play in neighboring countries and visit the Guinean community in New York.

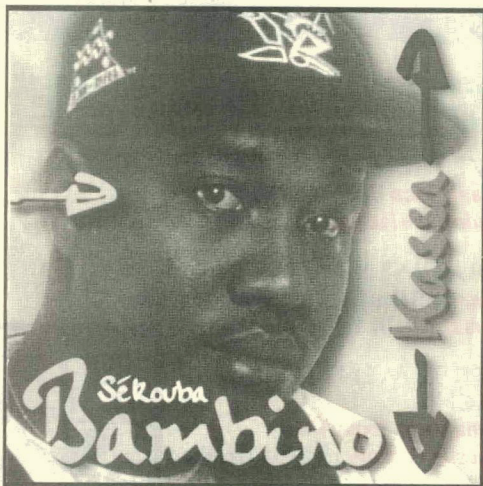
Bambino's current international release includes songs from two hit albums, recorded over three months in Paris in 1996, along with some new material. *Kassa*, the title track, is the name of a work-song rhythm from northern Guinea which is used in the communal agricultural

plots. "It encourages the people to work hard in the field, it gives them a tempo for using their hoes which they sing along with and then, when the work is done, the rhythm helps them on their journey home." At the pace they're going you can believe the people need music to make light of hard work.

Several of the songs, including the swinging opening number "Bonya," deal with the theme of respect which is something about which Bambino feels strongly. He puts lack of respect as the cause of all wars and strife, and in "Acanadia" he quotes the story of an ancestor who fought the white man for 33 years, 33 months and 33 days, all because respect was lacking between them. He also touches on love, philosophy, responsibilities and good times. There is even a train song—the smooth, chugging *Autorail*. Bambino's lyrics are all in the Malinke (Manding) language, although on this collection of 14 songs, he has used five different arrangers. "We tried to make a blend of the Manding sound with Western instruments and elements which are familiar to people who don't understand Mandinka," he explains. At the suggestion of producer Sylla, piano was introduced for the reflective "Damensena," and between the two they allocated other songs to the various arrangers.

Sylla's grasp of pan-African marketing is renowned and he has introduced a range of different grooves to Bambino's compositions—always maintaining his own signature of a bright, crisp mix with perky chorus and brassy interjections.

Most tracks were arranged by the Guinean Ibrahim Soumano, but others from Boncana Maïga (Mali), Yves Ndjock (Cameroon), Paulinho Vieira (Cape Verde), and Jean-Philippe Rykiel (France) add variety and interest. The Frenchman, who has



played and collaborated with Salif Keita and Youssou N'Dour, has a special empathy with West Africa. "He is an 'African' even though he is French," says Bambino. "He travels in Africa a lot and he does his research. He is blind, so he doesn't see color, but he understands Africa through his ears."

Listening to Bambino's voice any of us can understand something of Africa by the same means. It makes you want to go to Guinea. ★