

New Voices from Africa

Ancient Traditions... **NEW ATTITUDES**



PHOTO BY MASAHIRO TOMIJI

Mali

Habib Koite

By Susan Cummings Maroni

On the final evening of a grueling two-month tour, Habib Koite can still muster his brilliant trademark smile. As he opens his last performance of the "Voices of Mali" tour in Boston, Habib tells the audience "the voice needs sleep," but he and his band Bamada sound just fine to a packed house at the Somerville Theater.

Habib has charmed audiences with his deceptively gentle approach to Malian roots music. There's no mistaking that creamy tenor and eloquent acoustic guitar style, created by Habib to evoke the ancestral voices of Mali's traditional stringed instruments. The "Voices of Mali" tour, spotlighting Wassoulou grande dame Oumou Sangare as well as Habib, swept across the country like an aberrant African wind, leaving sated music lovers and glowing reviews in its wake.

Onstage, Habib, resplendent in native garb and dreadlocks, manages a little English patter between a varied and eclectic menu of songs. The audience basks in the warmth of his personality, willing him to find the English words to complete his stories. But when Bamada glides into one of Habib's compositions, language is irrelevant. Halfway through the first song, people are swaying and bobbing in their seats.

Balafon and calabasse, harmonica and kamale ngoni ripple behind Habib's intimate vocals; the layers of sound are as light as filo pastry, as substantial as whole-grain bread. Habib's stunning guitar work

does not replicate the sounds of kora and ngoni but, by judicious tuning, he conveys the soul of traditional griot instruments. Even on the most upbeat songs the band's pacing is elegant, never rowdy. Habib is a generous performer, sometimes kneeling with his guitar at the edge of the stage, a la Hendrix, and then breaking into loosely choreographed dance with his band.

Over steaming mint tea, Habib recalls the Bambara term he coined for his music, *danssa doso*, combining the name of a popular rhythm (*danssa*) from his native city of Kayes and the word for hunter's music (*doso*), which is one of Mali's most potent musical traditions.

"I put these two words together to symbolize the music of all the ethnic groups in Mali. I'm curious for all the music in the world, but I make music from Mali. In my country, we have so many beautiful rhythms and melodies. Many villages and communities have their own kind of music. Usually, Malian musicians play only their own ethnic music, but me, I go everywhere [musically]. My job is to take all these traditions into me, and to make something with them, to use them in my music."

In an arid nation of many cultures divided by history, language and geography, Habib's self-imposed task is a heavy one: to map a musical landscape for all Malians, to honor these separate and distinct ethnicities while helping to forge a shared culture for his country. Mali enjoys more stability than many other African nations, but still grapples with ethnic tensions within its arbitrarily assigned borders. Habib, like most Malian intellectuals, sees a popular culture for Mali as vital to its future.

Born into a griot (hereditary musician-historian) family, Habib was nonetheless exposed to a wider world in his youth. In many griot families, young people are trained only for their traditional functions, but Habib was encouraged to have formal schooling. His early intent was to study engineering.



Habib's grandfather played *ngoni* (West African lute) as a full-time musician, and his mother, a *jelimuso* (female praise singer), still sings professionally at weddings. But Habib's father found work outside the griot mold. "He played guitar, and also accordion, for fun," says Habib. "Most of my big brothers play guitar for fun." Among his 17 siblings, only Habib and one sister, a singer, are professional musicians.

"When I was very young, I followed my mother to work, to weddings," he says. "I didn't plan to become a musician. It happened slowly, very slowly. But music was my passion." He began playing guitar instead of *ngoni* or another traditional stringed instrument because "there were always guitars in my house."

In 1978, Habib entered the National Institute of Arts in Bamako, where he studied music, including classical guitar. Six months after he enrolled, Habib was appointed director of the school's prestigious INA Star band. He graduated at the top of his class in 1982. When his former guitar teacher died, Habib replaced him on the Institute's faculty, and taught at the school for 14 years.

Meanwhile, he began playing club dates with a Malian version of the American cover band (paying gigs, but artistically unsatisfying). Habib says of those days, "I was always tired. I would teach at the school all day, and I would teach guitar to the children of French people in the evening. Then I would strap my guitar on my motor bicycle and Brmmmm... I would go to play in the bars until very late. Seven nights a week! It was a hard life."

Habib formed his own band, Bamada, in 1988. By 1991, the group was going strong. That year, Habib won first prize at the distinguished *Voxpole Festival* in France. He used his winnings to record two songs, one of which, "Cigarette A Bana," became a hit throughout West Africa. Habib's second prestigious French award, in 1994, *Radio France Internationale Decouvertes*, led to his first European tour. Habib Koite was launched.

American audiences have been blessed with a procession of superb Malian musicians, each of whom has increased our

musical vocabulary. Ali Farka Toure, Salif Keita, and Habib's colleague on the "Voices of Mali" tour, Oumou Sangare; all have been embraced by world music fans here and in Europe.

But Habib's appeal seems broader still. Though his repertoire makes no concessions to Western listeners, ("I play for us, for Malians," he says), Habib's songs are getting serious airplay on adult alternative radio, and he's been featured on NPR's program "All Things Considered." He has recently appeared in *People* magazine and *Rolling Stone*, and has been the subject of an extensive article by David Hecht in *The New York Times*.

Hecht states that Habib's musical explorations are more valued outside the boundaries of Mali than within them. According to Habib, that's not the case. "At the beginning, some Malians didn't understand. They decided to wait and see... But some songs of mine had great success. 'Fatima' [strongly influenced by the Songhai sound of northern Mali] and 'Sira Bulu' [Habib's retelling of an ancient Manding tale] have had great success. So now most Malians understand what I'm doing." Both of these songs appear on his first cd, *Muso Ko* on Alula Records.

It's worthwhile to read the translated lyrics that accompany *Muso Ko* and Habib's second cd, *Ma Ya* (Putumayo). Potent themes and vivid, stunningly beautiful imagery leap off the pages, giving the songs another dimension.

"I like technology, fax and Internet... But I fear for my Manding culture. She is so beautiful," he sings in English on the song "Kumbin," from *Ma Ya*. "Bitile" from the same cd, voices the same concern in rap idiom aimed toward African youth. It's a theme that recurs in Habib's work and conversation. He has spoken before of his vision that someday soon, in a grass-thatched hut, a village chief will communicate with the world via his

computer.

He gazes directly into the eyes of Western visitors when he sings, also from "Kumbin," "We can learn from each other... You remain a foreigner, in a faraway land, when you use the fork and everyone else [uses] the hand..."

Habib strives to maintain the integrity of the regional music he borrows. He sings at least a few words in the language of whichever culture he is exploring, and makes lyrical references to their source in his songs. "Pulaku," from *Ma Ya*, portrays the Peuls, a tribe of oxherders. Over the pungent wailing of Peul violin, Habib sings of yellow-gold cows and of the frankness and richness of milk.

The Tuareg people who live in the north of Mali have had ongoing problems with the national government. Several years ago, another dispute flared. Says Habib, "Many women singers went on the tv to sing songs that said 'no war, no war, kele a bana.' But I told a story with my music instead."

The song was "Fatima," from *Muso Ko*. In "Fatima," Habib spins the tale of a boy who sees his future wife for the first time in a dream. When he consults a marabout (soothsayer), the young man is told that his beautiful maiden does indeed exist, but that he will have to search the length and breadth of Mali to find her. After an arduous journey, the boy is discouraged. He has searched everywhere except the far northern desert and surely, he reasons, no maiden as beautiful as his vision could possibly live in the north. But he sets out for the desert anyway, and eventually finds his true love there, sitting in the shade under a tree.

The symbolism embodied in this song is clear, but the character of the composer also bears observance. Subtlety is his benchmark. Habib Koite makes simple points, understated but manifest, regarding his country: No one's voice should be unheard. Beauty resides in each culture. Let's pay attention, before it's too late. ❖