

OUMOU *Sangare*

L'Oiseau de Wassoulou
Mali's Nightingale



Oumou Sangare, Mali's premiere female singer, is wildly successful in her West African home country and is making her mark on the world stage as well. Her origins are in the Wassoulou region, an area of Mali renowned for its strong tradition of women vocalists. Watching her perform, it is tempting at times to compare her to Aretha Franklin, Billie Holiday, Diana Ross, Sarah Vaughn. But of course Aretha's soulful fire, Billie's range and vulnerability, Sarah's impeccable phrasing, Diana's seductiveness that I hear echoed in Oumou's voice, all must have come from the same source—their great-great-great-grandmothers in Africa.

In December 1995, I was given a rare and privileged opportunity to get behind the scenes and watch one of Africa's superstars and band at work. And work they do—for every hour and a half on stage, there's 22.5 hours of traveling, packing up and unloading, logistics, sound checks, preparation, winding down, plus all the necessities of daily survival most of us take for granted, like eating, sleeping and making phone calls. On tour with Oumou and her group for three days in the Netherlands, I gained enormous respect for performing musicians who roam the world to bring their talents to our doorsteps. I was also invited to spend a day in the studio as World Circuit producer Nick Gold captured on tape the sounds that would become Oumou's latest album, *Worotan*.

BY CC SMITH

Oumou had been introduced to the American audience in the summer of 1995 as part of the Africa Fete tour. Later that year I had another opportunity to see her on stage at the WOMEX conference in Brussels. Both performances had been phenomenal, visually and musically. But observing the group from the other side of the footlights and behind the scenes gave me new insight into the life of working musicians and what it takes to create this music that we can so casually stroll into a record shop and buy off the rack.

**FOR WE HAVE SUFFERED ENOUGH
WOMEN OF THE WORLD, RISE UP
LET US FIGHT FOR OUR FREEDOM.
WOMEN OF MALI, WOMEN OF AFRICA
LET US FIGHT FOR WOMEN'S LITERACY
WOMEN, LET US FIGHT TOGETHER
FOR OUR FREEDOM
SO THAT WE CAN PUT AN END TO
THIS SOCIAL INJUSTICE**

—Tiebaw, "Worotan"

Strong stuff—I haven't heard fighting words like this since the '60s. Adding to the enormous appeal and significance of this beautiful and talented artist is the fact that her music has actually caused a major social revolution in Mali. The messages in her songs have been taken to heart by the women of her country, who for centuries have been restricted by the roles established by traditional culture. Even the younger generation of men is changing its attitudes toward women because of Oumou's songs. It has been a conscious effort on her part to educate her public in the problems caused by polygamy and forced marriage, traditions that are still widely practiced in Mali.

HERE COMES THE BIRD OF WASSOULOU WITH THE GOOD WORD

—"Kayina Wura," *Ko Sira*

The lyrics of her songs, in translation, are quite poetic and full of advice, criticism and the joys of love and pains of death. In addition, I noticed that there were several references to birds, and wondered why. "You have two songs on the album *Ko Sira*, 'Kayina Wura' and 'Mani Djindala,' where you call yourself the 'bird of Wassoulou' and the 'nightingale of Wassoulou.'" I ask the young diva. "Why do you refer to yourself that way?"

She smiles and explains: "At home, they call all the women singers 'birds.' Because, before, the birds were messengers, in Wassoulou—the carriers of messages. If I wanted to send a letter, I'd give it to a bird, attach it to its foot, and the bird would go to your house. When you saw the letter on its foot, you say—oh, this bird wants to tell me something, and you catch the bird, you read it, and say, Oumou's saying this to me, that to me—there's a war starting between me and Oumou."

"That was how it was before the whites came to our country... before the telephone, in the past century, it was the birds who were the messengers—you'd give the message to the birds, and they would go send the message."

"So, at home, when one sings, you have a message to say—when I sing, I have a message to say to the women—that they have to have courage, they have to get up, they have to choose a man who loves them and refuse to accept forced marriage, they can't accept to be treated like a slave."

"And the men, what do they think of this message?"

"Well, it hasn't been easy," she admits. "At the beginning, I had a lot of problems, when I gave a concert, there weren't a lot of men in the room... it was women in Bamako. Because, the men said, it will not be anything, she will just say a lot of nonsense. They'll talk about things that are not interesting. But the women said, let's go, she's going to sing for us, she's going to encourage us, let's go. So, it started like that. But later, I had a lot of success, more even than the men [singers]. Everyone participated, even the men, there were a lot of men, maybe more than women, in my camp, especially the young men. It really changed a lot."

"Do you think you're changing the ideas of the men?"

"The young men—I'm not talking about the old men, but the young men's ideas are really changing now. It is rare to see a young man now in Mali who will say to you I want to marry four women, or two women, they're saying I want to be with just one woman. If it doesn't work, I'll leave, but I want to be with just one. That's the idea now. It has really changed a lot. And we are going to continue fighting until it changes completely."

AMSTERDAM—This historic club in the heart of Amsterdam, The Melkweg, whose name means Milky Way, had recently opened a new, larger room, with a capacity of 900. Tonight is jam-packed, and later I heard the audience that night was closer to 1300. Before the set, Oumou directs everyone like a general before battle, very much in control of the band, and seemingly comfortable

in the role as one of the few women in African music to lead her own group.

She calls out: "Appelle Sidi!" and lanky *djembe* player Basidi Keita starts the drum call and moves onto the stage. Singer/dancers Bintou Diakite and Alima Toure, collectively referred to as *les filles* (the girls), costumed in cowrie shells and raffia skirts, dance out from the wings with their carved calabash bowls on their heads and take their position. Oumou favors coming on last, singing unseen from the side, letting her voice precede her, then sweeping onto the stage—arm held high, to a grand ovation. She is by no means a small woman—with her four-inch heels and a towering headwrap, she must measure six feet tall. She's incredibly stylish and carries herself regally: broad shoulders, the

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OUMOU AND LES FILLES
IN PERFORMANCE
AT S.O.B.'S IN NEW YORK.



PHOTO BY ROBERT SMITH

better to display her stunning collection of flowing robes. Her statuesque physique supports a powerful voice that issues seemingly without effort, sweeping from a husky low alto to a piercingly honed top range, an amazingly supple instrument. She has tremendous control as she negotiates and adorns the complicated melodies; the melismatic tones as baffling to me as Aretha's gospel warbling and as impossible for me to reproduce, even in the shower.

By mid-set she's removed her headwrap and high heels to dance barefoot with les filles in a Diana Ross and the Supremes-style choreographed dance routine, waving her headtie in the air, exhorting her musicians, egging on the djembe, and bringing everything to a powerful climax.

There's so much going on during the show—the spinning gourd bowls, the beautifully made *kamelngoni* and djembe, Oumou's *shekere* rattle and swirling gown, the guitar and flute solos, les filles swaying and dipping in their fringed skirts and tossing their long, braided hair.

"Saa Magni," one of my favorites, is a very soulful, almost bluesy number. Her low husky voice moans, but then there's that glass-lined upper edge and amazing flexibility. Her voice can recall at times the harsh dry desert environment from whence she comes, delivered with the relentless power of a sandstorm, yet it can be as soothing as a brook in a green oasis.

Her timing, delivery, phrasing and moves are all the ingredients of a great and accomplished singer who is staunchly and immutably rooted in her traditions. With her queenly bearing, determination and self-control, plus the added dimension of the poignant and pointed lyrics—and then you realize she's not even 30 years old yet—well, you have got to be in awe of this woman.

Her strong political and social opinions become evident when, on stage, as a preface to "Moussolou," she stops the music to preach: "Je chante pour les femmes (I sing for the women). I'm not against men—I adore them all. But we want to defend the rights of women."

I ask about her childhood: "You always say there are problems with polygamy *malfait* (badly done). Was that the case in your own family?"

"Yes, a lot," she sighs. "My father had three wives. He had a wife before marrying my mother, who divorced him and left. He married another besides my mother, that's why I say two. I grew up with two wives [in the house]. There was always a problem with jealousy, between the two women and with my father. My mother did not accept it, she did not support it, and she left my father when I was 12. It was something really shitty. Because when you marry two women, and they're not living in the same house, it's still acceptable. If the women are living in the same house, there's always a problem. That's why I hate polygamy."

"Is it possible to have polygamy well done?"

"It's possible, but the rules are very hard. When you are a man of means,

*Deep Soul: Oumou evokes
images of Billie Holiday,
Aretha Franklin and other
great female singers.*





PHOTOS BY CHRISTIEN JASPARIS

you can take care of four women. Financially, you can satisfy all the women, but otherwise—you can't satisfy four women at a time. I don't think so."

"Are there any benefits for women in polygamy?"

"No, never—it's always bad for the women. It's better for the men, always."

"Do you consider yourself a feminist?"

"Yes, in my style. Because my way of being a feminist is to sing for the women, and I'm going to continue to do that."

EINDHOVEN—The vibe tonight is different: The audience is seated in a formal concert hall. It is beautiful and fairly new, intimate (360 seats), with fine acoustics and top-quality sound equipment courtesy of Philips, headquartered in Eindhoven and a benefactor of the new auditorium.

Tonight Oumou is wearing a beautiful cantaloupe-toned robe and headwrap, with sparkly striped slacks under, and black patent high heels. The embroidered scoop neckline shows off her beautiful shoulders. But she doesn't have that feedback like last night at the Melkweg, with the audience packed up against the front of the stage to inspire her—she's playing but not performing.

During the second song, Oumou's calabash splits in half. The cold weather and near-nightly use are playing havoc with the handmade wooden instruments. What will they do for the rest of the tour? Or even the rest of the set? Part of the charm of the act is those three twirling calabashes. Even her shekere rattle is losing its cowrie shells.

Oumou returns to the stage in a green sparkly outfit. Her multicolored voice caresses "Saa Magni," creating a deep, bluesy mood. The voice comes as effortlessly as the flight of a bird, and just as mysteriously, as those high notes soar over the room.

After her rallying "women" speech, she urges everyone up out of their seats to dance with her. Various African men jump on stage to press guide notes into her hand and onto the foreheads of les filles. By the fourth or fifth song, more people are jumping on stage to dance, one tall dude in a red Nehru jacket, one in white shirt and pants, and a character

in a long purple robe—all doing a decent job of it, too. People are starting to gather in the side aisles to dance as well. A Dutch friend comments that it is unusual to see his compatriots respond so demonstratively to anything, so she's obviously doing something right.

The fascinating dichotomy Oumou presents can be seen in the contrast between the rough mudcloth costumes of the band and her, dancing barefoot, in her shiny, sophisticated, green lurex ensemble. From a staunchly traditional base, she is forthrightly questioning all the rules imposed by African society on women, showing that they can be broken and still hold to the roots. I had learned that she had married not too long ago, and has a young child now. How does she reconcile her views in her personal life? I inquired, "What does your husband think about all this? Does he agree with you?"

She nods, "I was very lucky to find an exceptional man for a husband. He doesn't know it, but he is perfectly in agreement with me. He says, I know we men in fact are truly dishonest. It is not honest, in the heart, but it is necessary to pursue their pleasure. It is just to satisfy their pleasure. It is not for happiness. He says, but I encourage you. It is not easy, but go ahead. I'm behind you."

I am of course aware of the myriad difficulties facing a woman with a career and family, and have to ask, "Sometimes when a woman is famous, her husband becomes jealous, he complains he is neglected, and so on. Do you have a problem with this?"

She smiles gently. "For the moment—and I say for the moment because you can't know a man down to the bottom—but for the moment I don't have a problem like that. He keeps me on track, and he is very open with me about that."

"Does he help out with the baby?"

"Yes, a lot. He is an exceptional father. He is more attached to the baby than I am. When we are together the child will spend the night with him, he is always with him, and I am free. He is wonderful. He very much wanted a child, and he pays even more attention to him than I do."

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OUMOU SANGARE

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I wanted to know how she started on this path, defying fundamental traditions: "Did you always have ideas like this, about the rights of women? How did these ideas come, and when?"

Oumou replies, with increasing intensity, "Since my childhood, I experienced this. Every day I saw women who were *tired*. I saw a lot of women who *suffered* because of polygamy. I said, oh la la, why don't these women protest that they don't like this system of marriage? Because at home the women are a little timid—in front of men, a lot. So it is necessary for women like me, and the other singers, who are fortunate to have the power to help them lose that timidity.

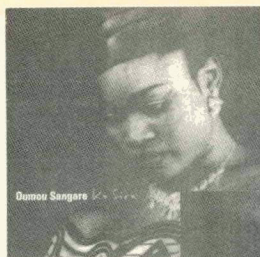
"I am a little timid, but not on stage, so I have the chance to say what these women have in their heads: that they are tired of this, that they don't want to marry a man who has other wives, that they don't want to be forced into marriage. I cry this to everybody—the men, the women who are in the audience—I proclaim this to everyone: We, the women, are *tired*! Please let us find our own love for ourselves. You don't have to marry four wives. The men have to think about it a little. This is not a way to live. The problem that we women have, now everyone will know. I am the voice for the women who are afraid."

This must have caused quite a sensation, I presume: "And nobody said 'Oumou, shut up, sit down, get out of here!'"

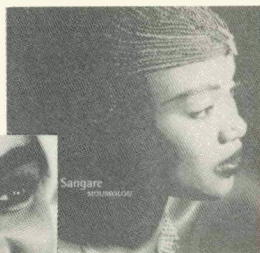
"Well, the men . . . there were some men who said no, we do not agree! It is not true! We do not agree. You can marry up to four wives. I always say, no—it is we who do not agree. Would you accept it if we married up to four men? So then, it is we who do not agree—we are going to rebel. It cannot continue like this."

RIDGE FARM STUDIO, CAPEL, SURREY, ENGLAND—Just a week after the end of the tour, Oumou and the band overcome some major obstacles to travel from Paris to England to begin recording their first album in three years. The grueling French national strike (*la grève*) has made everything incalculably difficult and uncertain, from the extra hassles involved in obtaining visas, to the cancellation of trains to England, to the sheer impossibility of driving through the total gridlock that has immobilized Paris. Finally they rent a van to take them to Belgium, where they catch a ferry to get across to England, and from there to Ridge Farm Studio, an hour out of London in the gently rolling farmland and country estates of Surrey.

The studio is in a converted thatched-roof barn of good-size



Oumou Sangare Les Filles



Sangare Karamoko



Oumou Sangare Morotan

proportions, with a vaulted ceiling and the control room with a 48-track analog board in what must have been the hayloft. When I enter the building that chilly morning, the first thing I see is Sidi standing in the middle

of the floor, stretched to his full six-foot something, his arms overhead lifting his djembe toward the ceiling. Puzzled, I wonder if this is some sort of ritual, perhaps offering the drum to the heavens to be blessed? Then I realize there are heaters suspended from the ceiling, and he is raising the drum up to heat and loosen the goatskin head for tuning. Eventually a higher-tech solution is found: a hair dryer, which solves the problem more efficiently.

The band lays down the tracks ensemble, with a minimum of overdubbing, and is able to complete a final take after only one or two attempts. "On y va" (let's go) is the cry when they start, "On va reprendre" when they want to redo it. Oumou faces *les filles*, and they dance as they sing. Massambou Diallo, the arranger, directs the session, smoothing the occasional rough edges with his professional expertise. He sings phrases and timing to the violin player and a new bassist, plays percussion. When *les filles* sing a note flat, he works with them until they get it right. Nick Gold is omnipresent—in the control room, on the phone, adjusting mics,



AT TOP: OUMOU'S THREE ALBUMS RELEASED BY WORLD CIRCUIT. AT LEFT: OUMOU, BAND MEMBERS AND PRODUCER NICK GOLD LISTEN INTENTLY TO PLAYBACK IN THE CONTROL ROOM OF RIDGE FARM STUDIOS. ABOVE: THE STUDIO IS HOUSED IN A RECONVERTED THATCHED ROOF FARM BUILDING IN SURREY, ENGLAND. OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP, OUMOU AND GROUP AT WORK IN THE STUDIO. SIDI, LEFT, WARMS HIS DJEMBE DRUM HEAD WITH A HAIR DRYER.



instruments, listening intently to the playback.

Oumou is the central focus, however, and obviously knows what she wants. The track that takes up most of the afternoon session is one of the most exquisite I've ever heard: "Djörölen"—the closest she has come yet to the blues, accompanied by nothing but flute and guitar, her voice visiting a range and tonality that I had not heard her do yet. I am alone in the room with the musicians when they do the final take, holding my breath as they bring the song in for a landing without a single fault. It is so moving I nearly cry—a stunning



PHOTOS BY CC SMITH

accomplishment. Later, I found the lyrics are indeed singing the blues, and worthy of the exquisite presentation:

IN THE FOREST THE ANGUISHED BIRD SINGS A SONG
FULL OF DISTRESS THE BIRD THINKS DEEPLY
WHEN A CHILD IS ORPHANED, WITHOUT A FATHER
THE BIRD SINGS IN THE FOREST . . .
MORE AND MORE WE LIVE IN A WORLD
RULED BY INDIVIDUALISM,
A SELFISH WORLD
I WORRY ABOUT THE FUTURE OF OUR WORLD

And of course she's taken back from modern music—African music doesn't exist in a vacuum, and the grand intercontinental exchange still continues. Searching for some of the factors that differentiate her music from that of the strictly traditional, I inquire: "You're from the city, Bamako, not from the village, and there must be a lot of modern influences—you must hear a lot of music from other countries, not just traditional music."

"Yes, a lot, like blues, rock, disco, reggae—a lot," she admits.

"Are there any singers that you like, from the U.S. or elsewhere?"

"Well, from the U.S., I like, for example, Tina Turner—she's very strong, and also Madonna, but not her style of dress. I learned that she



defends women, she talks a lot about women—is that true?"

"Well, in her way," I chuckle, "although I'm not sure what it is exactly she's trying to say."

"The woman that I like the most though is Miriam Makeba—I adore her so much, since I was small. She's my idol."

Later in the week they were to be joined by a horn section led by saxophonist and arranger Pee Wee Ellis, from James Brown's band, which would further explore the affinity between West African music and blues, soul and r&b. This would be her first time to use horns, so I ask Oumou if this had been her idea, suspecting it was something Nick, the ever-ingenious producer, had devised to throw into the global stewpot.

She maintains it was her idea to include some other instruments, to modernize and change the style a bit, explaining: "When you do music, you do it for everyone—you have to invite everyone. I welcome all ideas, all instruments. I want to mix everything, because I want everyone to participate, so everyone can listen to the traditional music from my country. We can use the Western instruments to get the attention of the whites to my traditional music."

That evening, after devouring a home-cooked dinner prepared by the Ridge Farm staff, the band members are relaxing a little by watching, of all things, a videotape of the John Belushi/Dan Akroyd film *The Blues Brothers*. They find the segment where James Brown appears in a cameo as a gospel preacher, and keep winding it back to see it again. Then someone remembers that Aretha Franklin is also in the movie, and they fast-forward to that part, where she plays a waitress in a diner and performs her 1967 classic "Respect." This is perfect, I think, as Aretha throws her arms up, head back, singing "Freedom, freedom!" One strong, brave woman, fighting the good fight 30 years ago, and now here is Oumou, raising her voice, just asking for a little respect.

The most memorable, most essential popular music always comes from a spirit of rebellion, and has the capacity to change the entire course of the music, if not to reform society: think Bob Dylan, Bob Marley or Thomas Mapfumo, bringing together the strands of tradition and revolution to forge a new direction for both music and society. At a crucial moment in American history Aretha defined an era, gave voice to her sisters' desire for love and liberation, and created some powerful music in the process. Sing it, Sister Aretha: *Think, think about what you're trying to do to me. . . Freedom, freedom. . . All I want is a little respect. . .*

It's a different language, a different culture and a different musical idiom, but the spirit and the message are identical, and echo in Oumou's rallying cry.

Grand merciements à Nick Gold and Jenny Adlington at World Circuit, road manager Michiel Jansen, and Ricardo Lemvo for helping with French translation.