Recently featured in the critically acclaimed Acoustic Africa Tour alongside fellow Africans Vusi Mahlasela and Dobet Gnahoré, Malian guitar virtuoso Habib Koité has grown from being one of Africa’s best-kept secrets to become one of the leading figures in contemporary world music. With more than 250,000 albums sold around the globe and nearly a thousand concerts on some of the world’s most prestigious stages under his belt, Habib Koité is one of Africa’s most beloved and popular musicians.

Koité has been praised in hundreds of newspapers and magazines, including The New York Times, Le Monde, People and Rolling Stone. He has also been featured on major national radio and television programs around the world including BBC’s The World, CNN World Beat, NPR’s All Things Considered, WXMN’s World Cafè, House Of Blues Radio Hour and The Late Show with David Letterman. And just this past June, Koité graced a 2-page photo spread in the pages of Vanity Fair magazine.

Among his expanding legion of devoted fans are Jackson Browne and Bonnie Raitt, who effused, “First there was Hendrix, then Stevie Ray and now Habib.”

After a six-year absence from the recording studio, Koité and his band Bamada return this fall with a stunning new album, Afrika. Years in the making and recorded on three continents, Afrika finds Koité exploring new musical directions. As with many craftsmen, Koité is a perfectionist, and spends a great deal of time composing and arranging his material. Unlike others, Koité draws on styles from the different regions of Mali, rather than solely on the music of his particular area. Koité has gained a strong fan base by integrating the rock and folk sounds of the Western world, without watering down his cherished Malian roots. Koité descends from a line of griots (traditional troubadours) who provide wit, wisdom and entertainment and his charisma and magnetism translates across cultures in a way few others have achieved.

Koité is an artist for a generation that has witnessed the breaking down of cultural barriers. His music proves that we do not have to forsake the past in order to develop, and that the modern world, for all its benefits, needs to keep its links to the folklore, mythology and history of the people in order for it to retain its soul.

www.habibkoite.com
www.imnworld.com/habibkoite
Malian guitarist Habib Koité is one of Africa's most popular and recognized musicians.

Habib Koité was born in 1958 in Thiès, a Senegalese town situated on the railway line connecting Dakar to Niger, where his father worked on the construction of the tracks. Six months after his birth, the Koité family returned to the regional capital of west Mali, Kayes, and then to Bamako. Habib comes from a noble line of Khassonké griots, traditional troubadors who provide wit, wisdom and musical entertainment at social gatherings and special events. Habib grew up surrounded by seventeen brothers and sisters, and developed his unique guitar style accompanying his griot mother. He inherited his passion for music from his paternal grandfather who played the kamele n'goni, a traditional four-stringed instrument associated with hunters from the Wassolou region of Mali. "Nobody really taught me to sing or to play the guitar," explains Habib, "I watched my parents, and it washed off on me."

Habib was headed for a career as an engineer, but on the insistence of his uncle, who recognized Habib's musical talent, he enrolled at the National Institute of Arts (INA) in Bamako, Mali. In 1978, after only six months, he was made conductor of INA Star, the school's prestigious band. He studied music for four years, graduating at the top of his class in 1982. (In fact his talent was so impressive, that upon graduation, the INA hired him as a guitar teacher). During his studies, Habib had the opportunity to perform and play with a series of recognized Malian artists, including Kélétigui Diabaté and Toumani Diabaté. He sang and played on Toumani Diabaté's 1991 release Shake the World (Sony), and Kélétigui Diabaté is now a full-time member of Habib's band.

Habib takes some unique approaches to playing the guitar. He tunes his instrument to the pentatonic scale and plays on open strings as one would on a kamale n'goni. At other times Habib plays music that sounds closer to the blues or flamenco, two styles he studied under Khalilou Traoré a veteran of the legendary Afro-Cuban band Maravillas du Mali. Unlike the griots, his singing style is restrained and intimate with varying cadenced rhythms and melodies.

Mali has rich and diverse musical traditions, which have many regional variations and styles that are particular to the local cultures. Habib is unique because he brings together different styles, creating a new pan-Malian approach that reflects his open-minded interest in all types of music. The predominant style played by Habib is based on the danssa, a popular rhythm from his native city of Keyes. He calls his version danssa doso, a Bambara term he coined that combines the name of the popular rhythm with the word for hunter's music (doso), one of Mali's most powerful and ancient musical traditions. "I put these two words together to symbolize the music of all ethnic groups in Mali. I'm curious about 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. My job is to take all these traditions and to make something with them, to use them in my music."

In 1988, Habib formed his own group, Bamada (a nickname for residents of Bamako that roughly translates "in the mouth of the crocodile"), with young Malian musicians who had been friends since childhood. In 1991, Habib won first prize at the Voxpole Festival in Perpignan, France, which earned him enough money to finance the production of two songs. One of those tracks, "Cigarette A Bana (The Cigarette is Finished)" was a hit throughout West Africa. After the release of another successful single entitled, "Nama (The Swallow)," Habib received the prestigious Radio France International (RFI) Discoveries prize. This award made it possible for the group to undertake their first tour outside of Africa during the summer of 1994.

In January 1995, Habib met his current manager, Belgian Michel De Bock, who, along with his partner Geneviève Bruyndonckx, are the directors of the management and production company Contre-Jour. Working together, they recorded his first album Muso Ko. Upon its release, the album quickly reached #2 in the European World Music Charts. From that point forward, Habib became a fixture on the European festival circuit and began to spread his infectious music and high energy shows around the world. Habib has played at most of Europe's major venues and festivals, including the Montreux Jazz Festival, WOMAD, and the World Roots Festival. In the spring of 2000, he even toured Europe and Turkey as an invited guest with the legendary avant-garde jazz group, the Art Ensemble of Chicago.

Habib's second album, Ma Ya, was released in Europe in 1998 to widespread acclaim. It spent an amazing three months at the top spot on the World Charts Europe. A subtle production which revealed a more acoustic, introspective side of Habib's music, Ma Ya was released in North America by Putumayo World Music in early 1999 and quickly helped establish Habib as one of world music's most exciting new figures.

Ma Ya spent 20 weeks in the top 20 of the College Music Journal New World music chart, and broke new ground at AAA rock radio, spending several months in regular rotation on commercial stations across the country. The album held the number one spot on the World Charts Europe for an amazing three months. Ma Ya has sold over 60,000 units in North America and over 100,000 worldwide, which is a tremendous success for a new world music artist.

The critical and commercial response to Ma Ya was tremendous. Habib was featured in hundreds of newspapers and magazines including People Magazine, Rolling Stone, Le Monde, Songlines, De Standaard, Le Soir and the cover of Global Rhythm magazine, to name a few. In the years since, he has also been featured in the US on National Public Radio's All Things Considered, WXPN's World Café, PRI's The World, the House of Blues Radio Hour "Mali to Memphis" special, prestigious international programs such as CNN WorldBeat, and in June 2007 was the subject of a two-page photo spread in Vanity Fair magazine. In 2001, Habib Koité and Bamada became one of the few African artists to appear on Late Night with David Letterman one of America's most popular television variety shows.

Habib's artistry and powerful personality earned him the adoration of fans such as Jackson Browne and Bonnie Raitt, both of whom ended up visiting Habib in Mali. They have both done a great deal to support Habib's music, by promoting private events designed to attract new audiences and even performing live with Habib on stage. Habib and his band even made a guest appearance on Bonnie Raitt's 2002 album Silver Lining, in which Bonnie and Habib performed a duet on the co-written song "Back Around."

Habib Koite & Bamada released their third album, Baro, in 2001 on Putumayo. The recording was also a huge success, selling more than 100,000 copies worldwide and further expanding Habib's global audience.

One of the keys to Habib's success has been dedication to touring. A true road warrior, Habib Koite & Bamada have performed nearly 1000 shows since 1994 and appeared on some
of the world's most prestigious concert stages. Habib has also participated in a number of memorable theme tours alongside other artists. In February 1999, Habib and American bluesman Eric Bibb toured in support of the Putumayo compilation Mali to Memphis, which highlighted the connections between Malian and American blues music. In the fall of 2000, Habib participated in the "Voices of Mali" tour with Oumou Sangare, one of West Africa's most renowned artists. Habib has also taken part in the Desert Blues project with fellow Malians Tartit and Afel Boucoum and the Putumayo Presents Acoustic Africa tour with South African troubadour Vusi Mahlasela and the rising young star Dobet Gnaboré from the Ivory Coast.

Habib Koite & Bamada's transfixing performances have endeared them to an ever-growing audience, and in 2003 they released Fôly!, a double CD of live material.

Devoted fans have waited a long time for Habib to return to the recording studio. As with many craftsmen, Habib is a perfectionist, and spends a great deal of time composing and arranging his material. Recorded in Mali, Belgium and Vermont, Afriki finds Habib exploring new musical directions. The overarching theme of Afriki, which means "Africa" in the Malian Bambara language, is about the strengths and challenges of the African continent. "People here in Africa are willing to risk death trying to leave for Europe or the USA, but they are not willing to take that risk staying to develop something here in Africa," says Habib. "Life can be really good or really bad wherever you live. People need to understand that. Even though Mali is poor, we still have good quality of life: You can walk outside and smile and someone will smile back. I have thought about it a lot, and I am not sure if poor countries have a worse quality of life."

www.imnworld.com/habibkoite
www.cumbancha.com
Showtime in the Sahara

When six fans of West African music, including Jimmy Buffett and Island Records founder Chris Blackwell, head for Timbuktu, in Mali, anything can happen: an impromptu reunion of the Super Rail Band; a Buffett duet with top female star Oumou Sangare; a mind-blowing festival in the middle of the Sahara, capped by the revolutionary band Tinariwen. One of the posse, former MTV chairman Tom Freston, offers his travelogue from a land where the electric guitar helped power a democratic rebellion.
Monday
TO BAMAKO

The city of Dakar lies at the westernmost tip of Africa, on the big continental bulge that juts out to the left on the map. We flew over it at night, on a flight from the Cape Verde Islands. The city was ablaze with lights, and then—wham!—it was total darkness out the window for the next two hours, until we hit Bamako, the capital of Mali, and our destination.

We are six friends looking to check out Mali’s renowned music scene. Over the years we’ve all been captivated by West African music. We’ll be in Bamako a few days, and then off to Timbuktu, in the North, and ultimately beyond Timbuktu and into the Sahara for the Festival in the Desert. It’s often called the “world’s most remote music festival,” a claim that should hold up.

Who’s “we”? We are: Chris Blackwell, a Jamaican and the founder of Island Records (Bob Marley, U2, Cat Stevens, and many African artists). Chris is traveling lighter than any man I’ve ever seen—flip-flops, African-print cotton clothes, and what is basically a purse. He has no visas and seems to just talk his way into countries. There is Jimmy Buffett, troubadour of the Caribbean, accomplished traveler, and aficionado of all things tropical. He’s got a G.P.S. device, a bag filled with walkie-talkies, and a guitar. There’s Kino Bachellier, from the French West Indies, a doctor on St. Barth’s until he met Jimmy there in the 1970s. That put an end to the doctoring. He has toured with Jimmy now for almost 30 years. There’s Bill Flanagan, a writer, novelist, editor, executive at MTV Networks, and commentator on all things musical for CBS. You will not find a man more knowledgeable about popular music. And, finally, there is Jonathan Brandstein, from Los Angeles, an adventurous manager of comedians and a world-music nut. He has been to Mali before.

Music is easily Mali’s most famous export. The level of musicianship here is extraordinary—there’s even a traditional musician class known as griots. Throughout Africa, music holds this incredible power; in a place where life can be hard, it is one of the greatest joys. A visitor quickly notices that music comes at you from every angle.
from every angle, like some esoteric mix tape. Mali and Senegal are perhaps the two leading places to go for West African music, but it comes in many variations. The good news is that they’re all good. There is the hypnotic “desert blues” sound from the North, exemplified best by Ali Farka Touré, who died last year. There are more danceable and rhythmic sounds of the South: Salif Keita and Amadou & Mariam are names you might recognize. You’ve heard this music. Snatches of it are in movie soundtracks and TV commercials. Western artists such as Taj Mahal and Ry Cooder and Robert Plant have done collaborations with African artists that have sold well.

Our plan is pretty loose; nothing is really set. We clear immigration and customs (Chris gets a visa), and head off to town. It’s 10 P.M. The streets are quiet, and everything seems engulfed in smoke. We cross a long bridge over the Niger River and roll up to our hotel, the Kempinski El Fasoak. It’s right on the river, and, as it should in a former French colony, has a decent wine list.

**Tuesday**

**ON A ROLL**

Bamako is low-rise and a bit gritty—nothing fancy here as, say, in Dakar. Many streets are jammed with traffic. I see a lot of vans and mini-buses with the doors taken off. The women wear bright, wonderfully mismatched blouses, skirt, and head-wrap combinations. The men wear caps and caftan-like garments called bou-bous. Lots of T-shirts too. Nike’s “Just Do It” seems to be a big seller. Every other person is on a cell phone, or buying or selling one.

I wanted to see the famous railroad station, built by the French. The hotel right next to it, the Buffet Hotel de la Gare, was the venue for the music scene that exploded in Mali after independence, in 1960. The hotel had a bar and a club on an outdoor terrace. There was a small stage, and back then lanterns were hung across the dance floor. The Buffet Hotel de la Gare was the Malian version of Max’s Kansas City.

In the 70s, Mali’s government, like many others in Africa, funded large bands to express the culture and vitality of the new nation. The Super Rail Band, which played at the Buffet Hotel, was one of them. It became the hottest group in the country—Mali’s Beatles. Some of its members, such as Salif Keita and Mory Kanté, went on to African superstardom and international fame. The Super Rail Band created a new sound, mixing Afro-Cuban dance rhythms and varieties of traditional Malian music. It was wildly infectious.

Today, it’s obvious that the good times have moved on. The place is in serious disrepair. But as we stand outside, imagining what had been, a man approaches us, curious. He is an older fellow, and through him we meet an actual member of the Super Rail Band. We propose a “reunion show” for that night. He says it is possible, and we negotiate a fee and ask him to bring an audio.

On a roll, we decide to try to contact Toumani Diabate, an in¬

**TUESDAY**

**ON A ROLL**

amok. I had heard that he was back in Bamako. Incredibly, he, too, is a kora player. (A kora is a 21-string harp-like instrument that cre¬}

**THE WANDERER**

A Tuareg tribesman who traveled two weeks by camel across the Sahara for the three days of music at Essakane.
a public meeting on land mines,” says Lord Deedes, “and she really knew what she was doing. She wasn’t just a royal observer.”

She wasn’t just a royal anything. That was the beauty of it. Had she lived, losing her H.R.H. might have turned out to be the best thing that had ever happened to her, just as her mother had said. Yes, she was losing most of the perks and protections of the royal cocoon. But the power of her magic touch with the media and the public was something no one could take from her. And what she was gaining was freedom—the freedom to act without the constraints and limitations of palace and political bureaucrats, the freedom to embrace causes of her own choosing regardless of their potential for controversy, the freedom to make a difference on things that mattered and to see results.

In Ottawa, Canada, not long after her walk through the minefields, 122 governments agreed on a treaty banning the use of antipersonnel land mines. The Nobel committee awarded the campaign the Nobel Peace Prize, coupled with the name of the leading American campaigner, Jody Williams. In the House of Commons, during the second reading of the Landmines Bill, in 1998, the British foreign secretary, Robin Cook, paid handsome tribute to Diana, Princess of Wales, for her “immense contribution to bringing home to many of our constituents the human costs of land mines.”

Diana was not there to hear it. She was alone on an island, in her grave at Althorp, the Spencer-family estate.

Desert Music Festival

Conti nu ed f rom pag e 0 0 0 price, a place (the Hogon Club), and a time (11 p.m.). Word would go out, and the club would be filled. We were now two for two. Then, to top it off, Jonathan gets a call from Oumou Sangare, Mali’s most popular female singer and its greatest champion of women’s rights—a true diva. Oumou has played Carnegie Hall. As is common here in West Africa, she also runs her own club and hotel, the Hotel Wassoulou. She would “love to see us” later tonight, she says.

At nine p.m. we arrive at the Rail Station. No sign of a band, but an audience has begun to build. To placate the crowd, Jimmy takes out his guitar and does a short acoustic set in the bar. Buffett at the Buffet. Meanwhile, the Rail Band does arrive, sets up, plugs in, and begins to play on the stage outside. There are eight players, including three front men. Some are in boubous, others in Western clothes. It’s dark, and there are no lights. Jonathan gets a taxi to come from Oumou Sangare, where Oumou is singing. Oumou came on the music scene back in 1990, at age 21. She hit it big from the start, owing both to her vocal skills and to her ability to generate controversy with lyrics that condemned polygamy and arranged marriages, and pushed for women’s rights. She was the first of a kind in Mali. Tonight, to a packed house and with a killer band, she roves singing among the audience and then implores Jimmy to join her on guitar. A brave man, he takes the stage, and together they knock out a rousing version of Bo Diddley’s “Who Do You Love?” It’s well after four A.M. when we stumble back to the El Farouk. Chris tells me it’s “the best single night of music” he’s ever had—this from the man who gave us Steve Winwood, Bob Marley, and U2.

Wednesday

THE NORTHERN FRONT

Timbuktu is a place I have always wanted to see. Once, in the early 1970s, I was in the Sahara in southern Morocco and saw a sign: TIMBUKTU—45 DAYS. That was for camel caravans, which ply the Sahara even now. Eons ago the big export from Timbuktu was salt, and the caravans made Timbuktu a wealthy city. In the 1500s it was home to a university and famous mosques.

Timbuktu used to sit on the edge of the desert. Today, with desertification, the sands have passed it by on their journey south. The city is inhabited largely by Tuareg, who are nomadic, very independent, and ethnically different from those who live in southern Mali. There are people in Timbuktu from the Fula and Songhai tribes as well. The Tuareg have risen up regularly—against the French in colonial times and against the Malian government today. There was a bloody rebellion more than a decade ago, with a lot of fighting in Timbuktu itself. It ended in 1996, with promises of better representation for the Tuareg in the government, and more freedom of movement.

Since then it’s been mostly quiet on the northern front. Today, Mali is a functioning Muslim democracy. On some levels, it is a study in success. The country is tolerant, diverse, optimistic, and stable. But it’s also, and very obviously, one of the world’s poorest countries. From the air Timbuktu looks like a sandcastle village of little brown squares. It’s a grid, dusty brown, and it morphs into the surrounding desert. There’s a new, empty airport terminal, but not another plane in sight. Here the city is spelled “Tombouctou,” which I file away, thinking it might be a good way to introduce myself to people here when the situation merits. Three young Americans, all with military buzz cuts and identical wraparound shades, meet us. Turns out they are looking for Jimmy Buffett. Parcheheads in the Sahara. They tell us they are with “the D.O.D.” I was unsure what that was, and they clarified (“Department of Defense.”) We’ll run into them again, but never quite figure out why they’re here. Outside, in the streets of Timbuktu, sand blows continuously. My companions and the few other Westerners I see have largely switched to Tuareg turban-like headgear. (I just can’t.) We are here for a dose of Tuareg music—that “desert blues” sound—but this afternoon all the shops are blasting out 50 Cent on the radio. I turn on the small black-and-white television in my hotel and see Sigourney Weaver in an Arabic-dubbed version of Alien.

Thursday to Saturday

MIDNIGHT AT THE OASIS

The Festival in the Desert takes place some 70 kilometers to the northwest of Timbuktu. We have a breakfast of bread, water, and Jamaican Blue Mountain Coffee (Chris’s stash). Afterward we drive into the desert in three S.U.V.’s in tight formation. There are no roads, just endless braids of tracks in the sand. The ride shakes us to the bone.

After four hours of this we realize we are lost, which is a bit of a disappointment. The guide from Timbuktu has failed. His head hangs down. A nomad materializes, and we ask him, in effect, “Hey, have you seen a festival around here?” And he answers, in effect,
Our tents are simple—a patchwork of animal skins tied to wooden poles and trimmed with decorative tassels, but with no door or flap. I went to sleep one night as a sandstorm raged outside, and awakened to find a foot of sand inside my tent. (Jimmy told me later that he had to zip himself tight into his sleeping bag and breathe through a rolled-up magazine he stuck through a small opening.) My neighbors are “the Libyan Delegation.” As Bill and I head to a dining area, we see a group of four men behind my tent holding down goats and slaughtering them one by one. After dinner we hike over the dunes to the stage. It’s dark now. Campfires burn everywhere, and camels stand in silhouette atop distant dunes.

The first group we see after coming all this way is . . . a bunch of Americans! They call themselves the Pangea Project, after the hypothetical landmass that the world’s seven continents once formed. All students of West African music, the members of the Pangea Project are actually quite good. They turn in an energetic set and gradually win over the locals. Next up is Adam Yalomba. A happy man in a shiny Western suit, he sings lead vocals and plays an electric kora in front of a big band. The audience is on its feet for him. At one point he drops his kora, performs some Motown-style dance steps, then does a full-front flip from a standing position—a real showstopper.

The festival goes on for two more days. The highlights include a tribute to Ali Farka Touré, Mali’s biggest star ever, featuring an impressive list of artists, Oumou Sangare and Toumani Diabate among them. An electric-guitarist from Bamako, Baba Salah, who is called “the Jimi Hendrix of Africa,” blows the house down. The festival closes with a rousing set from the group Tinariwen.

Tinariwen is the stuff of legend in these parts. It is basically a rock band—six electric guitars, three female singers, and a percussionist—with a rebellious political flavor. The classic Tinariwen image: turbaned soldier-musicians on camels with Kalashnikovs and Stratocaster guitars crossed over their shoulders. Their story says much about the power of music in Africa, and about the recent positive turn of events in Mali.

Tinariwen was formed in 1982 after a young man named Ibrahim Ag Alhabibe abruptly fled the country. Years before, his father had died at the hands of Malian soldiers; now, after a period of nomadic wandering throughout the Sahara, he was lured with two friends to southern Libya, where Colonel Muammar Qaddafi had established military training camps to help the nationless Tuareg. There he discovered not only a refuge but also—who would have guessed?—electric guitars! The young men practice, they write songs about revolution and freedom, and they marry these lyrics to a new electric sound. On top of that, these young Muslims create a band that has (gasp) women in it. Then, in this land of no media, no Internet, the music of Tinariwen travels all over the Sahara by cassette and inspires an entire generation of young people. The music is officially banned in Algeria and Mali, which only adds to its allure.

In the 1990s, Tinariwen joins with the Tuareg rebellion. It’s as if the Rolling Stones went off to war. Ibrahim, the leader, becomes an obvious target. He is shot and wounded 17 times—twice as many times as our own 50 Cent, and surely a record for gunshot wounds by any living musician anywhere. Peace comes. The band moves back to Mali, signs an international record deal, gets down to business, and becomes even more popular.

Tinariwen’s story parallels Mali’s more hopeful scenario. Swords turn to guitars, democracy blooms, and music helps bring a sense of national unity. I’m not sure I ever understood what those American soldiers were doing in Mali’s desert. But I do know that the American invasion that really made a difference here was one of electric guitars. □
HABIB KOITÉ & BAMADA

AFRIM (CUMBANCHA)

* Of all the music emanating from West Africa these days, Malian music gets the lion's share of the attention, and with artists like Habib Koité on their side, it's easy to understand why. Koité is one of the biggest names on the Malian music scene, and because he hasn't put out a new studio album since 2001's Boro, Afriki is an eagerly awaited release. That it's worth the wait is clear from the opening bars of "Namania", as sunny acoustic guitars and light percussion create the perfect backdrop for Koité's sweet voice. The subject matter of the album is, as the title suggests, Africa - its beauty, its landscape, the challenges it faces and a call for self-sufficiency. Rarely do you hear music so relaxed, yet energetic and free, perhaps reflecting Koité's vision for the future of Africa.

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* As Ethiopia celebrates the millennium (see page 70), now's the time to reflect not only on the history of the country itself, but also on the life of the man who did more to embody the Ethiopian identity than anyone else: Haile Selassie. Denis Gérard's affectionate and in-depth overview of the Emperor's life comes complete with extensive black-and-white photographs. The text is in French, so you might have to brush up a little, but it's definitely worth it.

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Habib Koité

The Malian stalwart has finally got round to a new album. Michael Stone catches up with him in New York.

Anticipating his first studio release in six years, Afriki (Cumbancha CMD-CD-5; see FF293), Habib Koité recently passed through New York, joining new label mate and 2007 Womex award-winner Andy Palacio, to sing at a West Village fundraiser for a documentary on Central American Garifuna music. Recognising an immediate diasporic connection, Koité enthused, “I want to go to Belize! The Garifuna are really into something!”

The response exemplifies Koité’s abiding interest in traditional music, beginning with his native Mali. Producer Jacob Edgar remarks, “Habib is open to western influences, but he also has a pan-Malian perspective. His knowledge of Malian genres is broad and deep, not least because he taught for so long at the Bamako conservatory.”

Koité’s voracious musical curiosity, broad international fan base, impressive CD sales, and fruitful collaboration with the likes of Bonnie Raitt (“My grand-sister,” he says fondly), Jackson Browne, Eric Bibb, and Gary Davis, have made him a prominent global voice. But success brings its own creative complications. “The last six years have been very busy, touring a lot, a lot, a lot. My life keeps changing and I’m never in the same place. I needed someone to wake me up, to tell me to make a new album.”

Enter Jacob Edgar. The UCLA-trained ethnomusicologist, long-time A&R rep at Putumayo (Koité’s former label), and old friend, recently launched Cumbancha Records. Afriki is Cumbancha’s compelling follow-up to Palacio’s critically acclaimed Wátìna. Koité: “Jacob’s insistence took me by surprise, saying it was time to make a new album, because I’ve just been touring so much.”

Koité elaborates, “On the road, I don’t have time to create new music. Being abroad so much, it takes me a while to get into the creative mood. I want to work with Malian traditions, but to make something new with them. Taking a certain ethnic genre, I want to respect it, to sing in the native language, and do it very well, so when people listen, they can be proud of their traditions – many of which are threatened in Mali today.”

“I want to work with Malian traditions, but to make something new with them.”

“Mali is my country – my wife, my kids, and my house are there. People are always visiting one another. When someone comes to your home, it’s customary to stop working and talk with them, not like in Europe or the States. At home I’m always busy, because I see my family so rarely. We are seventeen brothers and sisters altogether, plus their kids! I also have my own business, I’m busy at home, but not because I’m creating new music.”

Still, I have to give something back to my fans, in Mali and abroad, to make time to create. I had to change how I work to be able to keep making new music. Now I take my laptop on the road. In my hotel room, I record ideas for new sounds, guitar tracks, percussion patterns, things like that. Then, when I go into the studio, I play it back and the musicians have something to work with. Afriki was made in a Bamako studio, in two Belgian studios, and finished in Vermont, at Cumbancha. My voice was in good shape, and I’m very happy with the result.”

What’s different about Afriki? “Take the song Nde Dama. I was in Southern Mali, talking with some older musicians. They told me the young don’t want to play the old music, so I worked with them, using their traditions.” The universal thematic result of the new album is the ardent concerns of a father seeking a husband worthy of his daughter.

The title track, sung in Bambara, has a brass section headed by Pee Wee Ellis, James Brown’s nonpareil saxophonist. “It was wonderful to be able to work with Pee Wee. I hope he can join us on tour. Afriki is about the modern encounter between Europeans and West Africans. So many promises, but they never deliver. Malians are so welcoming, but when the young try to go to Europe, the doors are closed. It makes me angry and sad. I want to make people believe in Africa, and work to improve the future. We have waited long enough. The UK promised to end poverty, to fight AIDS and infant mortality, but we keep waiting.”

Are Habib’s fans ready for this message? “Well, when our young people try to cross the Mediterranean or the Atlantic for a better life, when we see the bodies of the dead who don’t make it, we must do something. We shouldn’t be seeing these young people dying on the road in this way. Why are they leaving their native homes? That’s what they need to understand, so Africans themselves can believe in Africa, so things can change. Africa will make its own way.”

From one who has helped promote Oxfam’s effort to address global poverty, these are not idle words. “I thank my fans, and trust they will hear this message. My hope is for Africa to gain world attention and for people young and old to really think about the global future.” Fittingly, the closing track, Titati (Rocking), is a muted guitar instrumental inspired by the Mandinka proverb, “Try to know those who love you”, encapsulating the fierce but tender spirit of a thoughtful, compassionate and uncompromising artist.

www.habibkoite.com
HABIB KOITÉ
Mali’s guitar playing griot

What are you listening to at the moment?

I listen to what my children listen to: rap, R&B, jazz, rock, African and Latin music. I tend to listen to radio for the variety rather than play CDs. RFI (Radio France International) has a great programme in the morning on African music, which I always listen to.

And your favourite sit-down-and-listen record?

The last Marcus Miller CD M2. I like the album's dedication to his musicianship and the sense of harmony. The album also has a great fluidity and is very well produced. The album also has a great fluidity and is very well produced.

And your all-time favourite record?

The album Talking Timbuktu by Ali Farka Touré and Ry Cooder has a special place in my heart. It’s a magical album and I like the blend of Malian music and Western influences. The interaction between the guitars of Ali and Ry Cooder is wonderful.

What’s the most memorable gig you’ve been to or played at?

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the ambience that the group generate on stage. They may have bought themselves some designer clothing but musically nothing much has changed, which is a blessing. It’d be a travesty if they were to go the way of many other Congolese groups and add a synthesizer to their organic sound.

For those unfamiliar with Konono No 1, they play a range of *likembés* (thumb pianos) that are amplified in a crude, distorted and exciting way. Accompanied by a mixture of traditional drums and homemade percussion, and spiced up by animated vocals, they are an awesome reminder that traditional street music can be an infectious, raucous, trance-inducing experience. The effect of the multiple thumb pianos is similar to Indonesian *gamelan*, but spectacularly more raunchy. The incessant buzzing and scratching of the percussion underpins some adept likembé interplay and the vocals shout out encouragement to anyone who wishes to join in the celebratory dance.

Nothing beats seeing a band like this in the flesh but this live recording is a very good second best.  

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**Lucky Dube**

**Respect**

Gallo LUCKY15

Full Price (65 mins)

**Dube steps out from Bob’s shadow**

The title-track of Lucky Dube’s latest album is as good as anything the South African reggae champion has recorded in his 20-year career. A seething, ranking roots anthem, it opens with one of those ringing, circular Zulu guitar patterns that never lets up. There are the usual ‘conscious’ messages overtly influenced by Bob Marley, such as ‘Shut Up’ and ‘Political Games’. But as with Marley’s own sons, who have finally realised they need to do something more than a karaoke version of their old man, Dube expands his musical horizons in a subtle fashion. Most *Songlines* readers will probably pass over ‘Changing World’, a stadium rock ballad that confirms Dube wasn’t kidding when he once nominated Toto and Aerosmith as his favourite bands. But the gospel-tinged ‘Shembe Is The Way’ and a further dose of Zulu-reggae on ‘Monster’ hit the mark. It confirms Dube wasn’t kidding when he once said that he would never go the way of many of his contemporaries. The husky voice, catchy choruses, trickling guitar patterns and clever jigsaw of Mali’s myriad musical traditions – all are there. Even the quality of the mix reflects his earlier works. Koité was one of the first artists to break the mould of the thunder-voiced song and ancient repertoire associated with the Mande griots, Mali’s traditional praise singers. He preferred to search the length and breadth of his home country, collecting ideas and inspiration from a huge variety of traditional sounds. Others have since followed in his footsteps, yet Koité’s musical universe remains entirely his own. As *Afriki*, almost every corner of the country is nodded to in the intricate guitar and percussion patterns that carry all of his songs. There are touches of desert blues, of the griot’s ngoni (lute), and even an eerie chorus of hunters’ antelope horns that softly caresses the clever arrangement of ‘Nta Dima’ and lifts it to a rare level of musical bliss. A slice of heaven wanting to be owned.

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**Habib Koité & Bamada**

**Afriki**

Cumbancha CMDCD5

Full Price (46 mins)

**Long awaited follow-up from questing griot**

If you’ve been wondering what the gentle giant of Malian music Habib Koité has been doing since his beautiful album, *Baro*, was released six long years ago, he quietly sneaks a fresh dose of acoustic Mali onto the market. Listening to the record is like having an old friend coming to visit, full of great tales and smiles. Only a few minutes into the album you almost forget that it hasn’t always been part of your record collection. It brims with all those comforting things that set the experimental griot Koité apart from most of his contemporaries. The husky voice, catchy choruses, trickling guitar patterns and clever jigsaw of Mali’s myriad musical traditions – all are there. Even the quality of the mix reflects his earlier works. Koité was one of the first artists to break the mould of the thunder-voiced song and ancient repertoire associated with the Mande griots, Mali’s traditional praise singers. He preferred to search the length and breadth of his home country, collecting ideas and inspiration from a huge variety of traditional sounds. Others have since followed in his footsteps, yet Koité’s musical universe remains entirely his own. On *Afriki*, almost every corner of the country is nodded to in the intricate guitar and percussion patterns that carry all of his songs. There are touches of desert blues, of the griot’s ngoni (lute), and even an eerie chorus of hunters’ antelope horns that softly caresses the clever arrangement of ‘Nta Dima’ and lifts it to a rare level of musical bliss. A slice of heaven wanting to be owned.

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**Mohammed Jimmy**

**Mohammed: In Concert**

Terp AS14

Full Price (57 mins)

**A fond farewell from Jimmy**

The voice of Mohammed Jimmy Mohammed, the blind Ethiopian singer, always evoked the more heartfelt and mournful end of East African blues, but this CD comes tinged with more sadness than usual as it has ended up being his last. Having suffered from poor health for much of his life, he passed away last December. All proceeds from this live CD will be put into an education fund for his two children. It is a memorable swansong, and a much stronger set than last year’s *Takkabel*. Mohammed is backed by the instrumentation of the *azmari* (Ethiopian singer-musicians): the five stringed *krar* (lute) and loping percussion that ably bear up his earthy tones and occasionally guttural delivery. The *krar* playing oscillates between light picking and aggressive strums that beautifully complement Mohammed’s range. Each track gets more intense, as backing vocals flesh out the songs before a grand finale that has saxophonist Brodie West adding some haunting minor melodies.
Habib Koité
Reconstruire l’Afrique


Habib Koité incarne l’intelligence de cette nouvelle génération de musiciens maliens, qui ont su se mettre à profit leurs connaissances de la diversité des musiques populaires occidentales pour faire évoluer leur création vers de nouvelles formes, débarassées des modèles anciens mais toujours articulées autour de l’identité africaine. "Je connais des jeunes qui ont grandi dans la tradition et qui n’ont fait que ça, dit-il. J’en connais d’autres qui ont cette même éducation musicale, mais qui ont fait de l’école, qui ont vu autre chose. Je fais partie du deuxième cas de figure. J’étais curieux des autres musiques et surtout de la jouer. Et quand on veut jouer, on doit comprendre la structure. J’ai joué dans les clubs pendant vingt ans : variétés européennes, rock, hits du moment, un peu de jazz, quelques trucs africains… Tout petit, lorsque ma mère allait chanter chez les gens, elle chantait la musique des griots. Mais je ne jouais pas avec elle. Je l’ai gardé en la regardant faire. Je gardais juste l’argent pour elle… Aujourd’hui, pour créer, j’essaie de prendre les racines dans la musique du terroir et j’y ajoute toutes mes influences. Lorsque j’écris un morceau, j’aimerais que l’on reconnaisse mon identité, malgré la sauce qui peut donner quelque chose de nouveau."

La musique des chasseurs est une influence décisive dans la musique d’Habib Koité : "À mes débuts, à l’institut National des Arts, je voulais apporter un côté traditionnel à la technique du dopté sur la guitare classique. J’essayais d’imiter les instruments traditionnels à corde de chez nous : le n’gôni, le dozon n’gôni (celui des chasseurs), le kaméné n’gôni (celui des jeunes). Les cordes étouffées me rappelaient le son du dozon n’gôni… L’habileté, les voix, les paroles des Dozon, membres de la confrérie des chasseurs, nous rappellent les relations entre l’animal et l’homme, la bravoure et les forces mystiques de la nature. C’est fascinant, dans un monde qui avance vers la standardisation, la technologie, la démocratie… J’entendais beaucoup leur musique, mais je ne suis pas un initié."

Pourtant sur scène, Habib Koité porte toujours le bolgarien. "Je tire beaucoup de ce costume. "Bolgari" veut dire "terre" et les couleurs des tenues sont faites avec de la terre mélangée à des herbes. Les chasseurs doivent se confondre avec la nature du Sahel pour attirer le moins possible l’attention des animaux. Ils rampent à l’affût du gibier et ont de longues bottes qui les protègent. Cette tenue m’arrangeait pour la vision que l’on aurait de moi. Et puis, c’est si simple de la lever tous les jours ! Avec le bolgarien, plus ça sent la sueur, plus on se sent dans l’esprit de la confrérie des chasseurs…"

C’est donc un bolgarien qu’Habib Koité mène la danse dans Désert Blues, spectacle et film magnifiques, avec les Tamashis de Tarit et Atel Bocoum entouré des Songhai et Poul de son groupe. "J’ai toujours eu le désir profond de jouer les différentes musiques du Mali, de chanter dans ses multiples langues et rythmes. Je voulais être un point de connexion, provoquer une rencontre, une occasion de se connaître, de se toiser, de se comprendre et d’échanger… Désert Blues est venu confirmer cette démarche. Mais cette fois, je ne suis plus seul à faire la musique de l’autre à l’appeler vers moi : nous sommes réunis pour montrer que l’on est ensemble."

Coaché depuis ses premières tournées internationales par l’équipe belge de Contre Jour, Habib Koité n’a cependant jamais été tenté de s’installer en Europe. Pour lui, vivre au Mali c’est offrir un exemple d’espoir pour la jeunesse africaine et c’est le message le plus fort de son superbe nouvel album : "Chacun doit réfléchir à comment reconstruire l’Afrique… Quand je vois les images d’enfants africains dont on retire les corps inanimés de l’eau parce qu’ils ont pris un bateau, prêts à mourir pour aller en Europe, et que malgré ces images, d’autres frères s’embarquent pour partir, je me demande quel est le monstre qui les poursuit pour vouloir partir coûte que coûte. C’est une image qui me fâche un peu. Je ne suis pas fâché contre les Africains ni contre l’Europe, je me demande juste ce qui se passe dans ce monde, pourquoi ces Africains qui se retrouvent dans cette situation et que les autres restent pâles. Les moyens sont là pour pousser essayer à très court terme d’installer un certain équilibre. Mais ça prend un temps fou. Tout ces processus que l’on met en place passent par un temps qui ne laisse rien à la population. Les autres pensent à nous, mais c’est à nous aussi de penser à nous-mêmes. Il faut qu’une décision profonde et ferme vienne de nous !"

Nouvel album "Afrîki" (2005/2006)
En concert à Paris les 7 et 8 octobre à l’Européen
> www.habibkoita.com <
The music of Mali comes to Delaware

DENNY DYROFF 02/05/2005

Fans of world music are in for a treat. On Monday evening, one of Africa's top musical exports will visit the Arden Gild Hall in Delaware. One of Mali’s premier musicians, Habib Koité, will perform with his band, Bamada.

Koité tunes his guitar to the pentatonic scale and plays on open strings as one would on the kamale n'goni. The modern instrument was created about 20 years ago by the rebel hunters of the region of Mali known as Wassoulou. Koité also writes and performs songs that sound similar to the blues or flamenco.

"The kamale n'goni is a small, six-string instrument from my country," said Koité, who sings and plays acoustic guitar, flute and maracas. "In many of my songs, I play my guitar to sound like a kamale n'goni."

His band is a veteran group of West African musicians. The name Bamada is a nickname for residents of Mali’s capital city, Bamako, and the word roughly translates as "In the mouth of the crocodile."

Mali has rich musical traditions, with many styles that are particular to the local cultures. Koité has created a new pan-Malian approach that reflects his interest in all types of music.

The style is based on the danssa, a popular rhythm from his native city of Keyes. He calls his version danssa doso, a term he coined that combines the name of the popular rhythm with the word for hunter’s music (doso), one of Mali’s most powerful musical traditions.

"In Mali, music is everywhere and I listen to it all," said Koité, who is a member of the Bambara tribe. "Danssa is the rhythm from my region of Mali. It can be slow or fast. I use this rhythm a lot. I also take the various other rhythms and make them my own."

"My music is a combination of traditional and modern music from around the world, including soul music, jazz and pop music. Music from Mali has always been very traditional. The new generation is looking for a different way. So I want to take these traditions and make something new."

Koité is using his 33-city American concert tour to help educate Americans about the plight of struggling farmers.

"Mali is a country with a high percentage of agriculture and where cotton is mostly cultivated," he said. "The Malian producers remain in poverty because of their inability to sell their products. This is a situation that must be addressed if there are true intentions to make world trade equitable and develop poor countries such as Mali."

In some recently released photos, Koité is pictured having cotton "dumped" on him to symbolize the plight of his country’s cotton farmers facing unfair competition from their American counterparts. Many farmers in Mali spend more money growing the cotton than they can earn selling it at current prices.

"It is my hope that the organizations which guide world trade will establish measures to address prices and subsidies more equitable for all countries throughout the world," Koité said.

What: Habib Koité
When: Feb. 7, 8 p.m.

Email to a friend  Print story
Where: Arden Guild Hall, 2126 The Highway, Arden, Del.

Tickets: $30

Information: 302-475-3126

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