



## Mali Renaissance Ali Farka Touré & Toumani Diabaté

In Bamako, in January 2004, the Malian guitarist Ali Farka Touré started work on a new album, his first for 5 years, when he agreed with his producer Nick Gold to invite the kora player Toumani Diabaté to record an old tune. This piece was a composition popularised by Toumani's father, Sidiki Diabaté, dating back to the 1950s: *Kaira*. In Malian, this word, according to custom, means 'peace', 'happiness' or 'health'. It also refers to a cultural resistance movement founded by the same Sidiki Diabaté when Mali was a French colony. As Toumani points out, the only weapons that the Kaira movement owned "*were koras, balafons and djembés. The women, our mothers, used to sing. The musicians used to go from village to village and used to revive the tunes of the past. This movement became so influential that my father was arrested by the Chief of the District of the Kita region, in the west of the country, and sent to prison. The French were afraid, quite rightly, that a patriotic sentiment was being reborn via this music*". In 1988, Toumani wanted to pay homage to his father and to the battle he had fought to protect the Manding heritage, by calling his first album *Kaira*. So Ali's invitation touched both his heart and flattered his pride.

As for Ali, via *Kaira*, he was seeking to salute the memory of another significant musician: Keita Fodéba, the founder of the Ballets Africains. This Guinean musical ensemble served as the model for all the bands created at the time of West African independences in the 60s, including Bembaya Jazz and the Rail Band. Ali tells the story that in 1956, he was in Guinea to get his driving licence, when he bumped into Fodéba. "*I saw him for the first time in front of the door of a building, not far from where I was staying in Conakry. He was singing, accompanied by a guitar, in front of a gathering of youngsters from the area. He was reviving old legends and the way he captivated his audience with his words and his guitar made a huge impression on me. You could say that Keita Fodéba was my first influence. He was the one who encouraged me to transpose onto a guitar those tunes that I used to play with my monochord*".

It would have been difficult for these two musicians to find a better meeting point. *Kaira* not only brought them together on account of an attachment to traditional musical forms or as a reference to a peaceful struggle for accession to independence by their country, it was also at the origin of their respective artistic vocations. According to Yves Wernert at the Bogolan studio, where this first contact was made, the recording of this composition, always very popular in Mali (there is even a rap version) was something that had to be done, "*as in a dream*". Toumani is keen to add that "*starting with Kaira is still a good thing, a good omen. It's like a blessing*." Another lucky witness, Nick Gold from World Circuit, recounts that at the end of this recording, "*Ali and Toumani moved onto another composition that hadn't been planned, that they hadn't rehearsed. So we had two songs. And then I said 'why don't we make a whole album?'*"

By expressing this wish, Nick did not know that he was going to push the two artists towards taking up a challenge. Since, from a musical point of view, the Manding region

style, to which *Kaira* is related, is a phenomenon completely different from all other African traditions. So, although most music from Mali develops from the minor pentatonic range – picked up in by the blues -, the Manding tradition that Toumani plays uses a range of seven notes – heptatonic – which in actual fact places him in a more complex harmonic register. This difference, perceptible to the ear, is not just theory. It also reflects a discrepancy of a social nature. Just as Manding tradition has remained, for a long time, cloistered within royal courts and aristocratic circles, reserved for exclusive use by griots [oral historians], other styles, in particular those practiced by Ali Farka Touré, are steeped in a more rural and nomadic reality. So much so that a meeting of their respective worlds is still highly exceptional even today. For the n’goni player Bassekou Kouyaté, although tackling the Manding repertoire is necessarily difficult, “ *playing the kora in the pentatonic range is also very hard, it’s not within the grasp of just anyone. You need someone at Toumani’s level to manage it.*”

In summer 2004, Nick Gold went back to Bamako, accompanied by his sound engineer Jerry Boys. His original plan – to record a new Ali Farka Touré album – had since been expanded by two additional projects: an album by Toumani’s group, the Symmetric Orchestra, and this record, outlined in spring between Ali and Toumani. A triptych that would soon find its coherence. The first few days were spent finding a venue to set up the mobile studio flown from London. This space had to offer good acoustic conditions but also be able to take a « family » of musicians that tended to grow by the minute. Jerry and Nick finally chose the conference room at the Hotel Mandé. An encouraging sign: this venue offers a breathtaking view of the Niger. In actual fact, it seemed inconceivable to try and capture the soul of Mali without having this great river as witness.

Just as for Ancient Egypt, it is not incorrect to talk about river civilisation for this country, whose totemic animal is the hippopotamus (Mali means “hippopotamus” in Malinke). We suppose that in the past, the ancients wanted to see in the amphibian nature of this stout mammal, evidence of a reconciliation of the river and earth elements vital to the prosperity and harmony of a vast territory, 80% of which is desert or semi-desert. And yet, this reasoning is eliminated today, even willingly, faced with the persistence of a legend according to which Emperor Soundiata Keita one day changed into a hippopotamus to escape his enemies. By identifying the founder of the Manding Empire with the immutable and reassuring presence of this animal, the legend has since sought to constantly encourage confidence in a world that nothing can really destabilise. It tries to remind the young generations that the basic values of the civilisation to which they belong are solid, but that they can also demonstrate agility if required. It very quickly became evident that the music proposed by Ali and Toumani was to take its inspiration from this unconscious. That through it, the two musicians would be able to explore a common landscape and history. And that differences inherent in their respective traditions would end up by producing something like a model of absolute harmony.

Being 25 years his senior, Ali was above all, a ‘koro’, a ‘big brother to Toumani. In Mali, “koro” does not necessarily imply kinship but suggests rather a respectful attitude towards someone older. The two musicians met in 1986. It was through Toumani that, on her first visit to Mali, Anne Hunt, one of the founders of World Circuit, was able to meet Ali. A few months later, the guitarist went to London to record his first album for the label. During this trip, Toumani was to offer his compatriot valuable assistance, acting as guide and interpreter and even playing percussion on this inaugural record, and at a concert given at the Town & Country Club. Since then, the two musicians have constantly shown each

other mutual admiration, tinged with affection. Other attachments, more distant, woven beyond their singular existences, pre-exist these personal links. Like the Kouyaté, the Kondé or the Sissoko, the Daibaté constitute one of the major families of griots – the jelis – , those musicians and singers of praise whose mission is to protect the traditions and the memory of their people. It is in Manding society that, for several centuries, the griot has played an important role, occupying the whole artistic framework and playing a vital role of moderation and conciliation on a social level. In modern society, the griots' function – the jeliya – is increasingly merging with the artistic dimension only, but the phenomenon cannot disappear since it alone is able to establish the link between a glorious – and glorified – past and an uncertain future.

The griot is, at this point consubstantial to the history of Mali, one of the reasons why, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Soundiata Keita went to war against his chief enemy, the Sosso King Soumaoro Kanté, because he had abducted his personal griot, Balla Fasséké Kouyaté. Emerging triumphant from the battle of Kirina in 1235, Soundiata was to unify the Mandé empire, making it one of the most prestigious in this radiant medieval Africa. His griot would have the honour of recounting his exploits. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Mandé empire, weakened by internal squabbling, was to be taken over by the Songhaï empire, which was to bring to the height of his fame Mohamed Touré, son of a Manding prince - one of Ali's ancestors – with the title of Askya. Another vital character in the story, Samory Touré was to attempt, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to revive the empire by opposing French colonisation with fierce resistance, which today means he features as one of the founder fathers of the national identity. It was under his reign that the Diabaté became Touré's griots, and from this ancient agreement, a certain complicity subsists. Thus, through their personal relationship, and in light of the historic and cultural heritage that they share, Ali and Toumani had the best reasons to one day speak the same language.

This relationship, symbiotic to history, the founding legends and the dream of the lost Empire, was to prove a determining factor in the success of another project dear to Toumani's heart: the Symmetric Orchestra. At first glance, everything seems to oppose the concept of these two albums produced simultaneously in the same place. The album *In the Heart of the Moon*, largely instrumental, was born of spontaneity, whilst the Symmetric Orchestra album took more than 15 years' effort and offers a wide variety of voices emblematic of the various styles of the region. *"With the Symmetric Orchestra, this involved, no more or no less, recreating, with music, the Mandé empire that Soundiata and his successors conceived"*, Toumani declares unhesitatingly. *"Reviving a cultural space, the heart of which lies between Mali and Guinea, and which extends from Senegal to the Niger, passing via Burkina Faso and the Ivory Coast; a space that colonisation broke up. I wanted to restore unity to this dislocated world, a unity that is also mine, that of my own history, that of my family. My grandfather came from Mali, but my father was born in Gambia"*.

In 1991, the Symmetric Orchestra's first album, produced by a Japanese musician Yu Imai, offers versions of Kaira and other famous compositions from the Manding repertoire, performed on a synthesiser. The album, which came out in Japan and in West Africa, met with a certain success but did not in any way fulfil Toumani's deep wishes. *"It merely revealed my intentions to modernise African music"*. At the time, the core of the Symmetric Orchestra, apart from Toumani, was Basekou Kouyaté on the n'goni, the blafon player Kéléligui Diabaté and the singer Habib Koité, who has since left, successful in a solo career. Without any real stability, the group became a kind of prototype on which, as the

great perfectionist, Toumani continued his experiments, constantly modifying the formula depending on encounters with new musicians, usually during evenings at the Hobon, his club in Bamako. This project was to take on such significance that, obviously, all the records recorded by Toumani for 15 years – on his own for Kaira or Dejelika or working with others as was the case for Songhai with the Spanish group Ketama or Kulanjan with the bluesman Taj Mahal – held a fragment of what the Symmetric Orchestra had promised. Throughout all this, sometimes painful, birth process, Toumani admits having to sell houses to pay for equipment and to pay his musicians. *“I nearly lost my wife because she had had enough of me spending most of my time rehearsing. I was just not seeing my family. At one time, both my personal life and my professional life were in upheaval because of the Symmetric Orchestra. Musicians with whom I have worked have died on the road. This is why this record means so much to me. This is why it gives me such huge solace and so much pride”*.

Some compositions played by the Symmetric Orchestra belong to the ancient Manding tradition, such as Mali Sadjo, the story of the hippopotamus with white feet which protects the village of Bafoulabé, near Kayes, not far from the Senegal border. One day, a white hunter with a black heart comes to the village and shoots the sacred animal. Like Kaira, this piece, symbolising a breach of the harmony between a community and its environment, is still played today. Toumani was to record two versions of Mali Sadjo with the Symmetric Orchestra. The first, close to the original, is performed in Kasonké by Mangala Camara, a native of the Kayes region. In keeping with this original version, we hear the drum hung from the shoulder, the doundounba. But we also hear the Senegalese drum, the sabar. The second version is sung in Wolof by Moussa Nianga Diabaté. This desire to include all the sound and linguistic nuances of this region is the distinctive feature of the Symmetric Orchestra, a band that Toumani has always imagined as a reference to these large bands, such as the Rail Band or the Ambassadeurs du Motel, who marked the period of independence. *“Since then, there have been singers and musicians in Mali but no bands. There is the Ensemble National but there is no orchestra in which we see the ngoni, the kamala ngoni, the xalam, the kora, the balafon and the various percussion instruments from the sub-region”*. The Symmetric Orchestra is not national, but multinational. As the product of a pan-African dream, it brings together musicians from Senegal, Niger, Guinea and from almost all the provinces of Mali. The other feature of the Symmetric Orchestra is disregard for the generation gap. This is the reason for the inclusion of not only Kassé Mady Diabaté, one of the most popular Manding voices, but whose rise dates back to the 70s, but also Oumou Sangaré, the diva from Wassoulou and the young Soumi Kanouté, who personifies the new scene. And finally, the only one not present on this record is Ali. No doubt because the Symmetric Orchestra record and the duo's record fully complement each other.

It is not by chance that during the piece entitled Débé, one of the 12 pieces on the Hotel Mandé album, Ali speaks words worthy of a nobleman addressing his griot: *“Diabaté! You are the only one who can do that. The only one to revive the past and those who are no longer with us!”* Débé is one of the recurrent compositions – like Kaira, Bajourou or Lamban – played by Manding griots at traditional wedding or christening ceremonies. Immediately, between Ali's guitar and Toumani's kora, a dialogue started a long time ago is spontaneously resumed. As if the differences in range and repertoire had never existed. If it was necessary to produce an image of the musical phenomenon thus produced, it is the emergence of a rainbow that best depicts the fusion of their two sonorities. The harmonic shimmering of the kora growing richer with additional nuances on contact of

guitar notes that are like as many drops of water evaporating from the Niger. When Nick Gold played *Débé* to Ry Cooder, the latter, amazed, could not help saying "Oh my God!". So that a track was opened for him, on which we can pick up, in the background, the sound of a "kawai" piano.

The twelve tracks making up this album were to be recorded in three two-hour sessions, without any rehearsal beforehand. Only one title needed a second recording on account of a storm that disturbed recording. "Generally Ali played a few notes and after two or three minutes, they were ready", recounts Nick. Sékou Kanté, brother of the famous Guinean guitar player Kanté Manfila, historic member of the Rail Band and the Ambassadeurs, plays the electric bass on some tracks. The renowned Cuban double bass player Cachaito Lopez honours another track with his presence. These sessions took place in continuation of the last recordings devoted to the Symmetric Orchestra. And practically followed on from one another. One third of the pieces – Kadi Kadi, Hawa Dolo, Ai Ga Bani and Gomni – came from the repertoire played by Ali, or which he had already recorded on these earlier albums. The remaining songs are basically Manding compositions such as Kaira and *Débé*. But also *Naweye Toro*, *Soumbouya*, *Kala* and Mamadou Boutiquier. Apart from coming from the same cultural melting pot, these last songs share a popularity seen in the 1950s and 1970s, that is, straddling the end of colonisation and early independence. A moment in Mali history that, like the current era, was intensely given over to the reconstruction of an African identity reconciling virtues from the past with a desire for modernity.

Some of these songs evoke the beneficial actions of characters who, whilst not being famous, made an impression on Malian society at the time. Such as Simbo and Mamadou Boutiquier. The former pays homage to Simbo Keita, responsible for the Cercle (the Cercle used to correspond to a prefecture's region in French Sudan) before becoming Mayor of the Town of Kita on independence. By his actions, appreciated by the whole population, Simbo won the privilege of surviving in this song. An honour also paid to Mamadou Boutiquier, a famous shopkeeper in Bamako in the 70s, whose memory is perpetuated by this gentle melancholic song, still fashionable in the country today. Ali, who knew this symbolic character, talks about a rich, tolerant and generous man. "He would never keep honey just for himself! Alas, when I knew him at the end of his life, he suffered from leprosy. But his name is etched in the people's memory on account of his benevolence and his generosity. This is why I reminded Toumani of this song".

In the west, it is customary to erect a monument to the glory of great men; in Africa, people prefer to pay homage to them with songs. Fate dictated that the day after Nick and Jerry arrived in Bamako, Ali learnt of his election to the post of Mayor of Niafunké. In 65 years, Ali has never left for very long this village located approximately 150 kilometres southwest of Timbuktu, on the banks of the Niger. To such an extent that his last album, entitled *Niafunké*, was recorded in the ruins of an unfinished school in this town in the Sehali region. In recent years, he has devoted most of his time and most of his energy to making sure that his fellow citizens are self-sufficient in terms of food. An action that has obviously been extended since his accession to supreme responsibilities. He has thus personally financed the construction of 3 further schools, set up health care posts in remote parts of the district and planted nearly 6000 trees after an invasion of crickets ravaged part of the surrounding vegetation in 2003. It will be agreed that this did indeed deserve the eulogy of a song. Using his art as a griot to the full, Toumani has composed in *Monsieur le Maire de Niafunké* (Mayor of Niafunké) a melodic piece marked by evident nobility.

And further homage: Ali says that “there is no one that can touch Toumani on the kora”. That there is no one to compete with him. He also says that he is young at heart [*literally: a “fresh date”*], suggesting that he still belongs to the young generation but has not, for all that, forgotten his past. It is clear that Toumani’s style has no equivalent. His playing seems to bring out several different musical sources at the same time, several voices that overlap and enter into dialogue with each other, producing the effect of infinite mirror reflection of striking beauty. To a technique that is profuse and lyrical at the same time, Toumani also adds a way of beating time with his use of low chords, sometimes even the resonance chamber on his instrument, which ends up by feeding the entire sound spectrum, making you think that this is no longer one harp but a whole orchestra led by just one man. The truth is that to achieve such a musical accomplishment, Toumani could not rely on tradition alone. Since although he belongs to a dynasty of Manding griots dating back 70 generations, he is, above all, the son of Sidiki Diabaté, the musician who revolutionised the art of the kora by taking it out of its orchestral context, definitively establishing it as a soloist’s instrument. Which does not prevent him, incidentally, from being a true self-taught musician. “My father never really had the time to teach me the kora. He was too busy forming the first version of the Ensemble Instrumental du Mali. When I was about 7, I tried it on my own, listening to the tapes my father used to record, then tapes of the big orchestras such as Bembeya Jazz, the Rail Band or the Ambassadeurs. But I also used to listen to Otis Redding, Jimi Hendrix and Jimmy Cliff”. A process of construction very similar to that which led Ali to adapt Songhaï guitar tunes, a shared way of assuming an artist’s identity, where celebrating one’s roots does not at all mean renouncing affirmation of one’s freedom.

Ali Farka Touré has always cultivated this freedom with the same steadfastness that he devotes to cultivating his fields. All his records indicate this permanence of putting down roots and a refusal to withdraw into himself. “I didn’t go to school but I always had a desire and curiosity about other cultures” he summarises. A philosophy never so well illustrated as on this record, where the two protagonists prove that the marriage between their music is not only possible, but that it can also result in something beautiful in which the truth and essence of each of them can be respected. “I don’t want to become someone else, but I want to enter into a dialogue with him”, they whisper to us between each note. It is not accidental that we are able to instance that many of these tunes, at various levels, speak about harmony, happiness and understanding. This is the case of Kaira. But also of two traditional tunes that Ali had recorded on these earlier albums – Gomni, “happiness” in Songhaï – featured on the album with Ry Cooder Talkin’ Timbuktu, which won a Grammy Award in 1994. Kadi Kadi is a song usually sung in Mossi dialect, that expresses the harmony between man and woman. Previously unheard, Ai Ga Bani – “I love you” in Songhaï – is a romantic ballad performed in the past by the Arma griots, a dissident branch of the Songhaï ethnic group. As for Hawa Dolo, from the repertoire of the 1992 album The Source, this is an adaptation of a dogon tune that pays homage to the honour of a young woman faithful to the pledge that binds her to her fiancé, whose return she awaits. On each of these versions, Toumani confers, with the intense delicacy of his playing, this essential feminine dimension. It is not surprising that Nick Gold is able to confirm today that he has not had such an incredible musical experience since the recording of the first album by the Cuban pianist Rubén González.

Songhaï, dogon, mossi music ... Of all Malian artists, Ali Farka Touré is the one who has always mixed the most musical traditions into his repertoire. A facility probably connected

with the great mastery of navigation that, in his youth, helped him manoeuvre pinasse boats loaded with sacks of rice and even to pilot the river ambulance between Mopti and Timbuktu. When he picks up his guitar, Ali is still a navigator seeking his way (which he unfailingly finds). Evidence also that the exchanges along the river Niger were varied, substantial and metaphorical, since they transported both goods as well as concepts, myths and obviously, music. "I could still fill 20 albums with Tamasheq, Songhaï, Peul, Bozo and Dogon tunes", he says. And how could we fail to believe him? In May 2003, Nick Gold received demos produced by Ali, in which he had picked up traditional tunes from the Diré region, north of Niafunké, accompanied by a n'goni player. "After Niafunké came out in 1999, I decided not to ask him for any more, in so far as he himself had said that this was his last recording and that he now wanted to devote himself exclusively to cultivating his land", points out Nick. "In 18 years' collaboration, this was the first time that Ali had taken the initiative by sending demos". No doubt, this was the sign that for this performer-citizen, there could be no hierarchy in the tasks that he assigned himself. When it came to recording these demos, Ali used to work at the same time on developing his foundation to protect the Niger from the silting-up that threatens it; he had initiated the construction of a library in Niafunké (a project that was to receive the financial support of the South African authorities) and had thought about publishing a book from photographic archives devoted to life in Niafunké in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which he hopes will come out in 2006. And finally, the recording of these traditional Diré tunes is the third part of this Malian triptych. Ali is accompanied by Bassekou Kouyaté, Mama Sissoko and Dassi, an n'goni player from Diré. According to Nick, "He's very concerned about the fact that this style specific to the Peul and Songhaï people of the region was disappearing. That no-one was playing this style any more, that young people did not know this repertoire and that if he did not pass it on, it would be lost". With the risk that the new generation would be missing a dimension essential for its survival.

Because for Ali Farka Touré, music is as important as rice. "Where there is no music, you can be sure there is no health either, no love, no inspiration or desire". For Ali, music is the supreme value against which the harmony of a community can be measured. This is why he holds so dear to his heart the preservation of tunes from his region but also that they be circulated as widely as possible. A concern that underlies all the artistic activity of Toumani Diabaté. So that the Symmetric Orchestra firmly conveys the idea that at a certain moment, the past necessarily becomes part of the future. And finally, via these three albums, Ali and Toumani, together and separately, tell us that in Mali, nothing of the future can be written without music. And that more than loving it, we should place our trust in it.

Francis Dordor