

H A B I B K O I T É

B I O G R A P H Y

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 troubadours 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 **Kélétiogui Diabaté** and **Toumani Diabaté**. He sang and played on Toumani Diabaté's 1991 release *Shake the World* (Sony), and Kélétiogui 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, "Nanalé (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 Montreaux Jazz Festival, WOMAD, and the World Roots Festival. In the spring 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 Koité & 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 his dedication to touring. A true road warrior, Habib Koité & 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 Gnahoré** from the Ivory Coast.

Habib Koité & 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."

Afriki is a co-production of **Cumbancha**, a record label founded by **Jacob Edgar**, who has been the head of A&R and music research at Putumayo for many years, and **Contre Jour**, Habib Koité's longtime manager and producer.

Hi-resolution photos, detailed biographies, tour dates, music videos and other materials are available for download at:
www.rockpaperscissors.biz/go/afriki