



TOUMANI DIABATE BIOGRAPHY

Toumani Diabaté is one of the most important musicians in Africa. Toumani plays the kora, a harp unique to West Africa with 21 strings; and more than any other kora player it is Toumani who is responsible for bringing this instrument to audiences around the world. He is a performer of truly exceptional virtuosity and creativity - someone who shows that the kora can rival the world's greatest instruments.

Toumani was born in Bamako, the capital of Mali, in 1965 into a family of exceptional griots (hereditary musician/historian caste); his research shows 71 generations of kora players from father to son. The most notable was his father, Sidiki Diabaté (c. 1922-96), a kora player of legendary fame in West Africa - dubbed King of the Kora at the prestigious international Black Arts Festival Festac in 1977, and a continuing inspiration to all kora players to this day. Sidiki was born in the Gambia of Malian parents. He settled in Mali after the second world war, where he became famous for his virtuoso "hot" and idiosyncratic style of playing (echoes of which can be heard in Toumani's style). After Mali became independent in 1960, Sidiki was invited to join the Ensemble National Instrumental – a government sponsored group formed to celebrate the richness of Malian culture - along with his first wife, Toumani's mother, the singer Nene Koita. Sidiki and Nene were much favoured by the first president, Modibo Keita – who gave them the land on which the family house now stands, underneath the presidential palace in Bamako.

This was the musical environment in which Toumani was raised - though in fact, he was self-taught, never learning directly from his father except by listening. In the 1960s, and more so the 70s, the Bamako music scene was being influenced by sounds from further afield, especially black American music: soul music was particularly popular as was Jimi Hendrix, Jimmy Smith, and British rock acts such as Led Zeppelin. Exposure to these sounds, and Bamako's modern ensembles, would both be important to Toumani's musical development.

A child prodigy, Toumani began playing the kora at the age of five, and at that time, the Malian Government was engaged in an active programme of encouraging regional ensembles to represent local traditions. Toumani was recruited to the ensemble from Koulikoro (some 60 kms east of Bamako) with whom he made his public debut at the age of 13 to great local acclaim. In 1984 Toumani joined the group of brilliant young musicians who accompanied the great diva Kandia Kouyate, the best known and most powerful female griot singer in Mali, with whom he toured Africa extensively, still only 19 years old.

Although not learning directly from his father Toumani took from him the idea of developing the kora as a solo instrument, and then took it to another level. Toumani discovered a way to play bass, rhythm and solo all at the same time on the kora, a method which would take him to the world stage. Toumani first came to the Europe in 1986 to accompany another Malian singer, Ousmane Sacko, and ended up staying in London for seven months. During this period, at the age of 21, he recorded his first solo album 'Kaira'. This was a groundbreaking album – it was the first ever solo kora album and it still remains a best seller and one of the finest albums of kora music to date. In 1986 Toumani also made his first appearance at a WOMAD festival at which he made a significant impact.

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During this period in the UK he met and worked informally with musicians from many different fields of music and encountered traditions that he had not previously known, such as Indian classical music, from which he derived the “jugalbandi” idea (musical dialogue between two instruments) that has since become one of his trademarks.

His first major recorded collaboration was with the Spanish flamenco group Ketama. When he first met them they immediately began doing “palmas” (interlocked flamenco clapping) to his music. Toumani couldn't believe that that they could have such an understanding of the rhythmic complexities of his music; it was as if they had always been listening to each other's traditions. The resulting album ‘Songhai’, with pieces like Jarabi, was a perfect synthesis of kora and flamenco.

For Toumani experimentation is simply part of the job of a modern griot, “The griot's role is making communication between people, but not just historical communication. In Mali I can work in the traditional way, elsewhere I can work in a different way. Why not?” In 1990 Toumani formed the Symmetric Orchestra. For Toumani the name evokes a perfect balance – a symmetry – between tradition and modernity, and between the contributions of musicians from a number of closely related countries. Senegal, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, and Mali itself, were all part of the medieval Mandé Empire. Toumani had the idea of recreating the cultural equilibrium of the Mandé Empire in a modern musical context – offsetting traditional and electric guitars with hard-edged sabar drumming; praise-singing and lute-riffing alongside pounding kit drums, with Toumani's own rippling kora phrases through it all. The orchestra name was first used on CD with the elaborate 1992 project , ‘Shake The Whole World’, released only in Japan and Mali. Maintaining a weekly residence in Bamako throughout Toumani's career, the group continued to evolve and grow over the years culminating in the release of the acclaimed album ‘Boulevard de l'Indépendance’ in 2005, and the extensive international touring that followed.

In the early-mid 1990s, in Bamako, Toumani began to gather around him a number of exceptionally talented musicians such as the brilliant Bassekou Kouyate on the ngoni, and Keletigui Diabaté on balafon, cultivating a certain sound and approach to his music –with a type of jazz-jugalbandi-griot instrumental ensemble which can be heard on his album ‘Djelika’ (as in the piece Kandjoura) released in 1995. In the same year Toumani travelled to Madrid to record ‘Songhai 2’.

In 1998 he recorded a kora duet album with Ballake Sissoko; their two fathers released the 1970s classic Cordes Anciennes (Ancient Strings), so the new album was called ‘New Ancient Strings’, it was their tribute to the original record and an attempt at bringing such material to a modern audience.

The connections between the blues and West African music are well known. Taj Mahal had listened to, and played with, many great kora players, and what most struck him as bearing an uncanny resemblance with the blues was the plucking techniques of the kora and other Malian string instruments. “They say that blues and jazz came from Africa” says Toumani.” “The kora and ngoni, they're very old, many centuries old. So maybe the blues were once being played on these instruments. Making the album with Taj is like bringing the old and new together.” The album ‘Kulanjan’ was released in 1999.

Constantly looking to evolve and innovate, Toumani's next album ‘MALIcool’ with American free jazz trombonist Roswell Rudd saw him take another step out on the edge. The arrangements on this album are sparse, leaving everybody room to improvise, and there are a few unexpected pieces such as an interpretation of Thelonius Monk's ‘Hank’, a swinging version of a Welsh folk song, and a leftfield take on Beethoven's ‘Ode to Joy’.

Toumani has participated in many other recording projects both at home and abroad: he appears on Ali Farka Touré's eponymous debut album for World Circuit; he toured with Salif Keita and appears on both his acclaimed album "Papa" and his latest release 'Mbemba'; he was part of Damon Albarn's 'Mali Music' project; he is featured on Kasse Mady Diabaté's 2004 Grammy nominated album "Kassi Kasse", and in 2007 he featured on the track 'Hope' on Björk's album 'Volta' leading to an inspired guest appearance on her set at the Glastonbury Festival.

In recent years Toumani has been enjoying recognition for his contribution to the development of the kora, and as a key figure in African music. In 2004 he received the Zyriab des Virtuoses, a UNESCO prize awarded at the Mawazine Festival organised by King Mohammed 6th of Morocco. He is the first black African ever to be given the prize. Toumani is an active and dynamic member of the Malian musical community, and influential to the new generation. He has been taking steps to help preserve the legacy of traditional kora music in Mali, and to educate future generations of their rich musical heritage, whilst encouraging them to also explore the creative possibilities within music. He is President/Director of Mandinka Kora Productions, who actively promote the kora through workshops, festivals, and various cultural events. Toumani is also a teacher of the kora and of modern and traditional music at the Balla Fasseke Conservatoire of Arts, Culture and Multimedia, which opened in Bamako at the end of 2004.

2004 also saw Toumani begin working with World Circuit for a trilogy of albums recorded at sessions in the Mandé Hotel in Bamako. The first release from these sessions was the duets album 'In the Heart of the Moon' recorded with the great Ali Farka Touré, which won the Best Traditional World Music Album GRAMMY Award. Second in the trilogy was 'Boulevard de l'Indépendance' by Toumani Diabaté's Symmetric Orchestra, packing the fruit of ten years of experimentation into some of the densest, punchiest, most richly textured music to have come out Africa (the third part being Ali's final solo album 'Savane').

Most recently the Symmetric Orchestra have proven to be a revelation on the international touring scene. Taking time out from their weekly residency at Bamako's Hogon club, the band have been building a reputation for themselves at their own headline concerts at venues such as New York's Carnegie Hall, and festival appearances such as Glastonbury, Nice Jazz Festival, and Montreal Jazz Festival.

In addition to this hive of activity, Toumani was also busy working on his new album 'The Mandé Variations', released in February 2008. Having spent years refining and perfecting his technique to an unparalleled level Toumani's career comes full circle. 'The Mandé Variations' is all-acoustic, Toumani's first album of solo kora since his groundbreaking debut album 'Kaira' released almost twenty years ago.

Throughout Toumani's career, each of the albums he has released are distinctly unique and highlight his diversity as a musician. This is indeed what Toumani is so good at – bringing together the old and new in timeless beautiful music, the very best that Africa has.

Based on original text by Lucy Duran; adaptation and additional text by Dave McGuire