



Sona Jobarteh



“Sona Jobarteh is Africa’s first female griot kora virtuoso, and also a fine singer and composer, blending traditional music, blues and Afropop to impressive effect” Robin Denselow, *The Guardian*

Preserving her musical past Sona Jobarteh innovates to support a more humanitarian future.

The spirit of Sona Jobarteh’s musical work stands on the mighty shoulders of The West African Griot Tradition; she is a living archive of the Gambian people. With one ear on the family’s historic reputation, one on the all-important future legacy and her heart in both places, she is preparing a place today for the next generation. Her singing and Kora playing while fronting her band, spring directly from this tradition. The extent of her recognition today is evidenced by more than 23 + million watchers on YouTube and considerable numbers on other digital platforms. All this despite singing in her native languages and keeping to her own path within the music industry.

Sona Jobarteh’s Live performances and speaking engagements zoomed to 52 performances with 12 sell outs during 2019 and post-pandemic to 67 in 2022; she completed 15 dates in USA from the Hollywood Bowl in LA to Symphony Space in NYC; she added WOMAD Australia and NZ. Sona has increased her audiences in London to sell out 1200 seats at The Barbican, 2,000 in Cologne’s Philharmonie, when playing Paris for the second time at Seine Musicale it sold out all 1200 places. These band performances are under-pinned by her skills as a composer arising from early days at London’s RCM and Purcell School of Music. She scored the film *Motherland* in 2010 and by 2022 was scoring some of the Hollywood blockbuster “Beast” starring Idris Elba, co writing a track on LL Cool J’s latest with Q Tip and filming several of her live shows for NBC’s “60 minutes”.

Sona’s dedication to spreading powerful humanitarian messages through her songs and her stage performances makes her much more than a musician; she is active in social change and leads by her own example. Sona singlehandedly set up The Gambia Academy, a pioneering institution dedicated to achieving educational reform across the continent of Africa. This Academy is the first of its kind to

deliver a mainstream academic curriculum at a high level, whilst also bringing the culture, traditions and history that belong to its students, to the front and centre of their everyday education. These efforts have gained her invitations to deliver speeches at high profile events around the world – including summits for the UN, the World Trade Organization and UNICEF.

Sona made 63 worldwide concert appearances in 2022, including a US Tour of 10 shows that followed on the heels of her Senegalese tour. Nevertheless, she managed to squeeze in special projects – 1) a commission for a guest spot from Q Tip producer of the forthcoming LL Cool J album, 2) a featured track for Hollywood blockbuster movie “Beast” starring Idris Elba 3) a 15 minute feature on CBS news “60 Minutes” programme which aired 13 November, just in time to co-incide with the release of her long awaited second album – “Badinyaa Kuomo” featuring Youssou N’Dour, Ballake Sissoko and Kirk Whalum.

ADDENDUMS

(a) GRIOT

A West African historian, storyteller, praise singer, poet, or musician. The griot is a repository of oral tradition and is often seen as a leader due to his or her position as an advisor to royal personages. As a result of the former of these two functions, they are sometimes called a bard.

(b) KORA

The Kora (a 21-stringed African harp) is one of the most important instruments of the Manding peoples and it belongs exclusively to the few “Griot” families within the Manding of West Africa and only those who are born into one of these families have the right to play the instrument professionally. The Jobarteh family is one of the five dynasties that holds this right. Sona’s lineage carries a formidable reputation for renowned Kora masters and most notable amongst these are her grandfather, Amadu Bansang Jobarteh – an icon in Gambia’s cultural and musical history – and her cousin, the legendary, Toumani Diabaté. Sona is the first professional female Kora virtuoso to come from any of the West African Griot dynasties. Breaking with convention, she is a pioneer in an ancient, male-dominated hereditary tradition that has been exclusively handed down from father to son for the past seven centuries

(c) MUSICAL EXPLOITS

Fasiya (“Heritage”) was released in 2011 and started her reputation as an instrumentalist on Kora and Acoustic Guitar, with a distinctive voice, singing and playing infectious melodies with a graceful onstage presence -this helped Sona to rapidly achieve international success as a performer. Her and her music seem to have the ability to touch audiences from all backgrounds and cultures, commanding the attention of Germany’s president, Britain’s Prince Charles and concert goers alike. Her captivating stage show has proved to be popular, and with a repertoire that exudes accessible sophistication, her audience demographic is expanding. She is a trained composer who majored in composition and scoring during her time at the Purcell School of Music in her earlier years, allowing her to land her first film commission scoring for the movie, Motherland. Here, she cultivated a fresh sonic in African, cinematic music. The film went on to collect multiple awards around the world. More recently, she was commissioned by PRS to compose a piece for Western and African instruments, exploring the meeting points between these two worlds through a dynamic, musical journey. In 2019, the composition was premiered at London’s South Bank. Sona is also a unique academic within the field of Mande music, history and social anthropology. She has lectured and held residencies at universities and colleges in Africa, across the United States and Europe.

(d) HUMANITARIAN

According to Sona, Africa faces the crucial and urgent challenge of addressing its education systems. Children who are fortunate enough to be able to attend school spend most of their waking hours in school, however in most cases the environment, culture, approach and curricula content within these schools are invariably oriented around a post-colonial value system and subsequently a foreign perspective.

For Sona, it is detrimental for future generations of the continent whose values and concepts are shaped during their school years, to continue to be trained within a system where African culture, African history, African traditions and their intrinsic values are either non-existent or at best, relegated to the position of extra-curricular exoticism. Her Academy is therefore the first of its kind to deliver a mainstream academic curriculum at a high level, whilst also bringing the culture, traditions and history that belong to students, to the front and centre of their everyday education. Her achievements in developing a new curriculum that reflects this reform at her Academy has gained her invitations to deliver speeches at high profile events around the world – including summits for the UN, the World Trade Organization and UNICEF.

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