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Habib Koité captivated the world with a compelling blend of local sounds

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By Darrell Jónsson, For the Post



Courtesy Photo

Since being awarded the Radio France International Discoveries Prize in 1992, Habib Koité has continued to deliver the full promise of his Malian sound via worldwide touring, several hits on the world music charts and kudos from artists like Bonnie Raitt, Taj Mahal and Jackson Browne. Koité's sound is firmly rooted in African soil but lacks the hard edge of the "desert blues" popularized by the likes of Ali Farka Toure and Tinariwen. Inherent to this softer sound is Koité's preference for nylon string guitars tuned to closely echo the sounds of the royal Mandingo kora harp and the traditional Malian lutes known as n'goni.

In 2007, Koité and his band Bamada crafted a potent return to roots with the Belgian Cumbancha release Afriki. Refined in the studio over a period of six years, it carefully blends a wide range of Malian influences into compelling contemporary world music. On the road as well in the studio, Koité's music is rounded by the skillful use of subdued electric bass, drums, acoustic violin, expressive congas, talking drums and wooden balofone accompaniment. All these arrangements are drawn from his homeland, where, Koité says, "The musical culture is still very present in the daily life of the Malian people. For instance, in the traditional events of birth, death and marriage, we can still hear stories sung about our families performed by great local singers."

Koité lists Ali Farka, Salif Keita, Toumani Diabate, Oumou Sangare, Kar Kar, Boubacar Traoré, Rokia Traoré and Amadou & Mariam as the most influential Malian artists who have joined him in gaining international recognition over the past 15 years. Still, there remains plenty of room for originality. Even though all these artists work from within the same national borders, Malian music has been going international for centuries.

"Mali is inside an area bordered by Senegal, Niger and Burkina Faso," reminds Koité. "And then, within Mali, there are many other rich cultures that have either been part of or in contact with Mali. Especially when it was the center of the Mandingue Empire, Mali had part of many neighboring countries inside its borders, and each part of the Mandingue Empire gave to Mali a part of its musical richness."

Koité's contributions to Mali's musical heritage go beyond simply coming up with a catchy signature sound. "What is really important for me is to give each song a specific character," he explains. "People coming from the ethnic group represented in the songs are supposed to recognize easily if the song is coming from their area. I use the local rhythms and the local languages like Songhai, Peul, Bambara and Iassouké. And I adapt these elements with my personal touch, my sensibility, my imagination, but keep the identity of the culture represented in each song. After that, I never know in advance if people will like the music, because what makes a nice feeling for each track is so personal to each of us."

Such methods made Koité, as Rolling Stone magazine once noted, "the biggest pop star of the West African nation of Mali." In 2002, Africa's adoration for Koité was made official when he won the Kora award (the regional equivalent of a Grammy) for Best West African artist. For those who attend Koité and Bamada's show at Akropolis next week, the proof will be in enjoying music that, via its embrace of diverse Malian cultures, has captured the ears of the world. It may often be a soothing sound, but, as Koité says, "It's always full of energy."

Habib Koité**When:** Monday,
March 23 at 8**Where:** Palác
Akropolis**Tickets:** 380-450 Kč,
available through
Ticketpro, Ticketportal
and at the venue

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