

discography

"Musu Ko is part of the refreshing body of real music from young West Africans that holds its own alongside the more synthesized counterparts from the superstars"

BEAT vol 15 - 1996

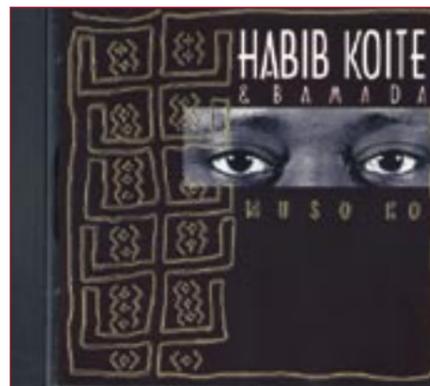
"Habib plays hunter's music, balafon music, northern takamba, his own Khasonke music.. That's difficult for a first album . But he has a sound all his own.

In a country where most artists are locked into a particular ethnic tradition, Habib Koite's ability to mold traditions to his own ends is unusual."

Billboard Report 1995

- 1 - I Ka Barra
- 2 - Muso Ko
- 3 - Den Ko
- 4 - Nanale
- 5 - Fatma
- 6 - Sira Bulu
- 7 - Nimato
- 8 - Cigarette A Bana
- 9 - Din Din Wo
- 10 - Kunfe Ta
- 11 - Koulandian

MUSO KO - 1995



This CD is like a musical voyage through Mali. I give myself the freedom to move from one rhythm to another. Over the years, I have played many popular African and Western rhythms and I finally decided to focus on Malian music. We have so many rhythms in Mali we do not have to play music from elsewhere. I feel this is something all African artists should consider; they just need to make an effort.

"Ma Ya is a mature and wise album you really shouldn't miss!"

Folkroots 1999

"Ma Ya combines the great guitar talent of Habib with the sounds of native instruments like the tama, n'goni, calabash and balafon.

Some of the songs are peaceful with beautiful melodies and underlying harmonies that may surprise you"

FMQB 1999

- 1 - Imada
- 2 - Wassiyé
- 3 - Ma Ya
- 4 - Bitile
- 5 - Sirata
- 6 - Foro Bana
- 7 - Saramaya
- 8 - Kumbin
- 9 - Mara Kaso
- 10 - Pula Ku
- 11 - Kominé
- 12 - ManssaCisse

MA YA - 1998



The gentle, delicate, intricate, acoustic and very traditional sounds of Habib Koite & Bamada almost seem to belong to a different culture. This is music built around a very delicate style of guitar finger-picking, extensive use of indigenous percussive instruments and a vocal style which is characterized by a sweet and touching melancholy... style perfectly appropriate for the subject matter of the songs - ranging from Wari (money) to the lovelorn Kanawa and Batoumambé and on the title track Baro about warmth, communication and companionship.

The sound is complex and filigreed with arrange of string instruments and bass being set against a bewildering range of percussions.

The end result is a music saturated in emotional gentleness and tenderness.

Sydney Morning / 2003

- 1 - Batoumambé
- 2 - Kanawa
- 3 - Wari
- 4 - Sin Djen Djen
- 5 - Cigarette A Bana
- 6 - Woulaba
- 7 - Baro
- 8 - Sambara
- 9 - Roma
- 10 - Tere
- 11 - Mali Sadio
- 12 - Takamba
- 13 - Sinama Denw

BARO - 2001



Live recording

"Habib Koite is without question one of the most gifted and compelling performers on the contemporary Afropop scene - and this joyous, vibrant two-disc set serves as affirmation of his place of pride. Fusing gentle, almost singer/songwriter like vocals with high energy playing that draws its inspiration from myriad Malian styles. Koité and his band Bamada soar through a collection of their hits.

More than 2 hours of music... but when spent in a such good company, the time passes in a flash!"

Billboard / Jan 2004

- CD 1
- 1 - Muso Ko
 - 2 - Fatma
 - 3 - Ma Ya
 - 4 - Sirata
 - 5 - Batoumambé
 - 6 - Bitilé
 - 7 - Imada
 - 8 - Kanawa
 - 9 - Wari

- CD 2
- 1 - Nanalé
 - 2 - Kominé
 - 3 - Nimato
 - 4 - Saramaya
 - 5 - Sin Djen Djen
 - 6 - Wassiyé
 - 7 - Cigarette A Bana
 - 8 - Kunfeta
 - 9 - Takamba

"This may be the most satisfying live CD an African band has ever recorded. It is technically beautiful but more than that, it takes brilliant songs and transforms them through the crucible of unflagging live performance".

Banning Eyre / Afropop

FÔLY «Live» - 2004



from Mali

www.habibkoite.com
www.contrejour.com



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Biography

Habib Koité comes from a noble line of **Khassonké griots**. He 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 **Kélétigui Diabaté** and **Toumani Diabaté**. He sang and played on Toumani Diabaté's 1991 release "**Shake the World**" (Sony), and Kélétigui Diabaté is now a full-time member of Habib's band.

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, "**Nanaté**" (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.

At the end 1994, Habib met his current manager, Belgian **Michel De Bock**. Working together, they recorded his 1st CD "**Muso Ko**". Upon its release the album quickly reached #3 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 & high energy shows around the world.

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.

In February 1999, in support of the US debut of **Ma Ya**, Habib Koité and blues artist **Eric Bibb** were the featured artists on **Putumayo's Mali to Memphis** theme tour, educating audiences across the country about the connections between the blues and Malian music. Habib returned with his band later that year, lighting up festival stages and concert halls around the country.

The critical and commercial response to **Ma Ya** in the US was tremendous. Habib was featured in **People Magazine**, **Rolling Stone**, and the cover of **Rhythm magazine**. He has also been featured on National Public Radio's **All Things Considered**, WXPN's **World Café**, PRI's **The World**, and the House of Blues Radio Hour "**Mali to Memphis**" special. **Ma Ya** spent an unprecedented 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 has sold 60,000 units in North America and about 120,000 worldwide, which is a tremendous success for a new world music artist.

Habib's artistry and powerful personality earned him the adoration of fans such as **Jackson Browne** and **Bonnie Raitt** (who collaborated with Habib on her 2001 "**Silver Lining**" CD), 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.

In Spring 2000, Habib toured in Europe with Kélétigui as an invited guest with the legendary avant-garde jazz band, the "**Art Ensemble of Chicago**".

"**Baro**" continues where **Ma Ya** left off, with a set of haunting melodies and virtuoso guitar playing. Habib is backed by **Kélétigui Diabaté**, Mali's undisputed king of the **balafon** (a West African wooden-keyed xylophone), who recorded with Lionel Hampton in the 1960s. With the support of the rest of the talented members of Bamada, Koité swings from the Cuban-influenced grooves of "**Batoumanbe**" to the ethereal and entrancing "**Sinamaw**." The acoustic, unadorned arrangements reflect centuries of Malian tradition, while incorporating subtle Western influences to create songs that appeal to people from all walks of life. **Baro** even includes a new, Latin-style version of Koité's first hit "**Cigarette A Bana**", the track that made him a star in West Africa.

In 2003, Contre-Jour released a double live CD "**Fôly!**" featuring 18 cuts culled from Performances throughout the Bamada's 2002 tour in Europe & featuring many of Habib's most popular hits. The songs are proposed with addition of new guitar, percussion & balafon breaks, musical interludes born on collective, on-stage inspiration.

Habib is know for his 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 **dansa**, a popular rhythm from his native city of **Kayes**. He calls his version **dansa 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.

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".

With one foot in the past and the other in the future, Habib Koité is an artist for a generation that has witnessed the breaking down of cultural barriers. While he respects and treasures the music of his ancestors, Habib also envisions a day when village chiefs will communicate with the world from his grass-thatched hut via a computer. Habib's music proves that we do not have to forsake the past in order to develop, and that the modern world, for all of its benefits, needs to keep its links to the folklore, mythology and history of the people in order for it to retain its soul.

Press

While many African performers have chosen to try to conquer Europe and North America by incorporating western sounds into their music and others are striving to perpetuate traditional music in a much more rigorous way, Habib Koité has adopted a his own highly individual style which is both infused with the traditions of his country and very much in tune with his times.

During a career which has produced a total of three albums and countless concerts across the world, Habib Koité has been able to develop his own very



distinctive approach to guitar playing in which the influences of his own country can be discerned as well as other musical styles such as blues or even the occasional touches of Cuban or flamenco sounds. You can also find in his music samples of the rich range of traditional Mali instruments such as the balafon, tamani or n'goni in his music.

Musical arrangements that set off his warmhearted vocals to perfection. But it is above all on stage that this guitar virtuoso, who descends from a long line of griots, is revealed.

Thierry Noville

Habib's World representation

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<p>Japan Alter Pop - Miki Kagami mikki@music.email.ne.jp</p>	<p>USA IMN World- Scott Southard +1 978 283 2883 • scott@imnworld.com</p>

Special projects 2006/2007

DESERT BLUES
A TRIP TO THE HEART OF THE SAHARA AND THE SAHEL
TOGETHER ON STAGE WITH A SPECIAL CREATION
AFEL BOCOUM
Reflecting the vast horizons, swirling colors and of the Niger river
TARTIT
Representative of the ancient culture of the enigmatic Tuaregs
HABIB KOITÉ
The New Ambassador of Malian Music

When Network issued the anthology "Desert Blues 1 - Ambiances du Sahara" in 1995 no one anticipated that it would be an international best-seller. At the end of 2002 a continuation of that musical journey to the rich, ballad tradition of the Sahara and the Sahel appeared: "Desert Blues 2 - Rives d'Oasis". This too elicited an enthusiastic response both from the press and the public.

The idea behind this major stage show is to spirit audiences away to the very heart of the Sahara and into the neighbouring Sahel region: to a world of tranquility, magnificent landscapes, stary caravans, camp fires. They will hear the rhythm of the caravans and get a sense of the dreams and the vivid activities at the oases. This dream journey will be enhanced by choreographs, lighting projections and an appropriate stage set. Another highlight of the evening will be the various encounters between the musicians, as they represent their different cultures.

Management & Booking
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End May 2006 & Spring 2007

Putumayo Presents
ACOUSTIC AFRICA

An exhilarating musical journey featuring three of the African continent's best live performers.

Putumayo World Music and International Music Network present the **Acoustic Africa** tour, featuring **Habib Koité**, the Malian superstar whose exciting concerts have endeared him to audiences worldwide, **Vusi Mahlasela**, a powerful singer-songwriter who sings of struggle and hope in the townships of South Africa, and newcomer **Dobet Gnahoré**, a stunning performer from the Ivory Coast who has thrilled crowds across Africa and Europe.

The tour will coincide with the release of a new **Acoustic Africa** CD featuring these and other artists as well as a new Putumayo CD by **Habib Koité**. The tour will receive extensive advertising and promotional support.

Booking Information:

<p>North America International Music Network 278 Main Street • Gloucester, MA 01930 Tel: (978) 283-2883 • Fax: (978) 283-2330 www.imnworld.com</p>	<p>Europe Contre-Jour Voye d'en Haut, 41 • B-5680 Vodelee • Belgium Tel: +32 (82) 667470 • Fax: +32 (82) 667472 michel.debock@contrejour.com</p>
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Fall & Winter 2006

Note:

At the release of his next CD (scheduled for Summer 2006), Habib Koité will be, of course, also available with his legendary band Bamada.

21st Century griot charms fans at Old Town School

By Aaron Cohen
Special to the Tribune

February 20 2005, 3:00 PM CST

Malian singer/guitarist Habib Koite has the kind of self-effacing charm that easily transcends language differences. On Saturday, his mid-set comments to the packed auditorium of the Old Town School of Folk Music elicited instant cheers, but the musician's endearing smile did pretty much the same.

Koite's musical ideas are as distinctive as his abundant charisma. He was born into the traditional familial caste of griots (musical storytellers), but has charted his own path. In Koite's hands, the tunings from the centuries-old hunters' harps of the Mande people have been transposed to the Western six-string guitar. He studied jazz and classical music in Mali's major conservatory and listened to rock on his own. The modern-day griot honed his tenor singing voice in Bamako's bar scene.

Since the mid-1990s, Koite's international audience has grown considerably. In particular, he has become a regular visitor to Chicago, performing at the Old Town School three times during the past five years.

For the most part, Koite's considerable technique was kept in reserve. His guitar solos added subtle contours to his sharp compositions. He also emphasized the smooth vocal harmonies among his group, Bamada. But, slowly, individual strains emerged. Sometimes, Koite's staccato guitar notes were contrasted with violinist Keletigui Diabate's elongated lines. When Diabate played the balafon (a sort of wooden xylophone), his lower tones were set against a high-pitched duet between Koite and guitarist Boubacar Sidibe.

While percussionist Mahamadou Kone and bassist Abdoul Berthe worked alongside drummer Souleymane Ann, the group did not indulge in flashy polyrhythms. Instead, Koite and Bamada usually stuck to a relaxed midtempo groove and added casually synchronized dance steps. At surprising moments, Kone's hand-held (talking) drum signaled the band to kick into high gear.

Along with his distinctive sound, Koite remains outspoken on various social issues. Many of his lyrics are comments on regional topics, and he spoke (in English) about the plight of Malian cotton farmers as he made a pitch for Oxfam America's fair-trade campaign. He followed the speech with a moving unaccompanied rendition of "Baro," a song that celebrates interethnic harmony. But Koite's biggest hit addresses a global concern, which was also the concert's upbeat finale. That song, "Cigarette Abana," warns against the dangers of smoking.

While it is possible to piece together the stylistic connections between Mande music and its American musical descendants, the audience on Saturday clearly enjoyed Koite and Bamada on their terms.

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San Francisco Chronicle Bridging continents with a sound all his own

Hearing the comment again makes Habib Koite laugh, and why wouldn't it? No other musician in Africa, let alone any other continent, can claim to have inspired Bonnie Raitt to utter, 'I would drink your sweat, but that's what Raitt reportedly said after seeing him play in Los Angeles several years ago.

She's very funny, Koite says in a phone interview. I call her 'grand sister.' She's very cool. Each time I come to California, she visits me backstage, and we go to eat together.

Raitt may be Koite's most visible supporter in the United States, where Koite has carved out a surprisingly large fan base in the past five years. Koite, who performs Thursday through Saturday in the Bay Area, is one of many Malian musicians who have established themselves in the West, but Koite is the only one whose songs incorporate native Malian traditions with a kaleidoscope of other influences, including jazz, rock and classical (Koite studied Bach and Beethoven in school). The result is a music that sounds familiar but is its own hybrid. Even people who know nothing about West Africa are drawn to Koite's sound -- which is why he's one of the few African artists who's played on Late Show With David Letterman, and one of the few who has fans from Estonia (the former Russian republic, where he's performed) to Japan (where he's also performed).

At age 45, Koite spends as much time touring the world as he does at home in Mali's capital of Bamako, but he seems to like it that way. He has become a kind of roving ambassador for his country, delighting in the way that he can play a catchy song like Cigarette Abana (an anti-cigarette track that is one of Koite's best known) and have people sing along whether it's in Paris or New York. In the United States, Koite first became popular when the Putumayo label (whose motto is music that's guaranteed to make you feel good!) showcased his albums. It's a sign of how far Koite has come that other labels have rushed to release his music, including World Village, which just put out a live two-album recording called Foly!

Koite says he feels humbled by his success. By birth he's a griot -- someone who, because of his lineage in Mali, was supposed to uphold his family's ancestral role as musical storytellers. At the height of the Malian empire, which ruled West Africa for centuries, griots wandered around their native land by foot and on animals. None of the previous griots in Koite's family ever left Africa, but Koite changed that tradition. That he's traveled so far beyond Mali's borders continues to surprise him.

I'm lucky, he says. I'm lucky.



Habib Koite, who is a secular Muslim, grew up listening to Jimi Hendrix and James Brown. In the 1970s, black American artists were big in Mali, a landlocked country that's divided into widely varying regions and ethnic groups. The country's desert-oriented north, where Kel Tamashek people (sometimes referred to as Tuareg) are concentrated, is radically different, for example, from the southern Wassoulou region, where traditional hunter societies live. As he learned to sing and play guitar around Mali, Koite practiced practically every style of music in his country. At one club it would be Wassoulou music; at the next club it would be Bamana (which is up-tempo and influenced by Islamic music). All the time, Koite would get requests to play a Hendrix song or one from James Brown. Koite's voice is smooth and reassuring, much like his guitar playing.

Usually, musicians in Mali play the music of their own ethnic group, but I try to play every style of music because I have a lot of experience with many types of music, he says.

Koite didn't reach stardom until relatively late in life. At age 30, he was working as a music professor at Bamako's National Institute of Arts. Around the same time, he formed his own group, and three years later, Koite won first prize at a French music festival. He won enough money from that to pay for the recording of two songs in Mali, one of which was Cigarette Abana, whose lyrics (At last he tries a cigarette but gets sick and says, 'No more cigarettes') helped make the track a hit around West Africa, where Western cigarette companies had inundated people with ads. After that, Koite won a major French prize, which led to concerts in Europe, full-fledged albums and a slow but steady fan base beyond Paris and Brussels.

When he performs tonight in San Francisco, Friday night in Sebastopol and Saturday night in Santa Cruz, Koite will welcome concertgoers who have seen him many times and others who were prompted by word of mouth or recent TV specials such as PBS' The Blues. The PBS series showcased Koite in the segment directed by Martin Scorsese, who spotlighted the connection between blues music and the music of Mali. American slaves from Mali brought with them instrument patterns that are still evident in the blues. Koite's musicians, all of whom are from Mali, play traditional instruments like ngoni (a plucked lute) and balafon (which is a kind of wooden xylophone), but they also use instruments associated with Western tastes, such as the violin and harmonica.

I'm not a traditional griot, Koite says. I try to take traditional music and mix it with my spirit and my imagination.



Press

Press

Acoustic Guitar Magazine, Cover Story: Habib Koité : the «Nylon-String Griot»

Press

In the frenetic, competitive world of Malian popular music, Habib Koité has always played by his own rules. Most singers stick with a particular ethnic tradition—the musical oratory of the Mande griots (praise historians); the pentatonic boogie of the Bambara people; the funky, hunter-inspired music of the Wassoulou region; or the desert blues popularized worldwide by Ali Farka Toure. Koité plays all these genres and more, sometimes combining them to create entirely new sounds. Most of Mali’s popular singers do not play an instrument onstage, but Koité is a versatile and accomplished guitarist. What’s more, he fronts his band, Bamada, with an acoustic nylon-string guitar, something unheard—of even among the few singer/guitarists on the scene.

These days, many of Mali’s big-name singers constantly change backing musicians, but Bamada is one of the few Malian bands that has kept its personnel relatively intact. In the capital city of Bamako, the era of guitar-driven dance bands—like the legendary Super Rail Band—mostly ended in the 1980s when singers found they could program a drum machine and hire a few studio players to get their songs on the bustling cassette market. But from the moment Koité formed Bamada in the early ‘90s, he insisted on band loyalty, daily rehearsals, and hard work to develop a unique, personal sound, and Bamada’s lineup has undergone few changes since. Koité’s new double live album, Fôly! Live Around the World (World Village), testifies to the wisdom of these choices. It is the work of a gifted songwriter and one-of-a-kind guitarist at the helm of one of the tightest and most powerful bands in African music.

As he began his 2004 US tour, I spoke to Koité about the live album and his place in the pantheon of Malian guitarists.

Let’s start by talking about Fôly!, a great of live recordings made at concerts in Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands in 2001 and 2002. Were you recording all that time with the intention of making a live album? Or did the recordings come first and the album idea later?

Habib KOITÉ We decided to do it first, and then we recorded. We decided to make a live album because people often asked us to do that: «You must make a live album!» People who know the group well had seen an evolution in the music. There are no new songs on the record. It’s the old songs. But as we’ve been playing hem over and over, they have really evolved. Each musician has added things to the parts he plays. So we said, we’ll record that.

I really needed a rest, so a live album made sense. That would give me a break, rather than having to record a new album. So we took the gear with us to make multitrack recordings. Then afterward, we kept choosing, choosing, until we found the best vrinof each one.

All over this record, you’ve extended what were five-minute songs to seven, eight, ten minutes. Much of what is added is great jamming with the band. How did these songs evolve?

Habib KOITÉ This is a group that plays a lot, touring everywhere, all the time. When you play the same songs all the time, that happens. We have about 35, 36 songs. But that’s not a lot if you want to change the repertoire a lot. You end up playing all 36 songs, year after year. Because of that, the musicians feel obliged to improve what they know, to do it better, to put something new in front of the people who see us play a lot. We play the old songs but add details to make it new. It’s an interaction between the musicians and the public.

How much of any given performance is improvised?

Habib KOITÉ Improvisation gives the music an atmosphere of adventure and helps people playing the same songs keep their enthusiasm up. Most of the improvising comes from the percussionist, the balafon, and me on the guitar. I don’t improvise a lot, just a little each time. There is a structure, and that is respected. There is an arrangement, signals for things when they start or when they end. But between the two signals people have some freedom to improvise. Of course, that freedom is controlled too. There is a special role for those who take care of the groove: the drums and bass. They are in a different situation. They have to be together, straight-ahead, but they can do a break together and come back if it works with the song. Then we who improvise listen to that, adjust to that. If it’s good, we accept t. It becomes a new signal in the song.

How did you get started with the guitar?

Habib KOITÉ It was in the family, at the house. My two grandfathers played the n’goni [spike-lute], the small traditional instrument. My father decided to play the guitar. He liked to get his friends over and play. We had a big family—my father had 17 children. I was in the middle, and my older brothers grew up playig guitar with my father. I too, in my time, played guitar around the house, a little. I didn’t think about it. I didn’t study. I just touched it like a child who was serious. But it evolved from there. By the time I was about 15, I had gained some confidence. I could play this song, that song. I could invite a friend over and say, «Play that and I’ll play this.» Later I went to music school, learned all this different music, played with lots of people and kept evolving, right up to today.

You platraitional Malian music, but you don’t play in the typical ways of a Malian guitarist. You don’t do the two-finger griot style like Djelimady Tounkara and other Mande guitarists, and you don’t play the flatpick pentatonic style of Zani Diabaté and his many followers. What made you want to figure out your own ways to play Malian music on guitar?

Habib KOITÉ It wasn’t on purpose. I didn’t start playing this way to avoid the way any other guitarist played. My way of playing came out of my experiences with the guitar and the way I approached the traditional music of my country. When I was young, playing with friends, what did I play? Rock music, a little jazz, a little variété [established pop songs], black American soul music. I listened to cassettes and tried to play things on guitar. So I grew up doing that, but at the same time we grew up with traditional music. We heard it on the radio, in te street, live. W ivedwith that. It was in our bodies.

From the age of 11, 12, 13, I played in clubs and restaurants. I would go to a restaurant, maybe where a lot of Europeans came and Malians too, and I’d play guitar for people’s pleasure. I was just doing it for fun. I wasn’t trying to play traditional music. People might ask for anything. I had many kinds of music in my repertoire, the hits of that year—English, French, American. That experience made me familiar with the structures used in a lot of different kinds of music. It also helped me evolve my technique. But then I went to study at the National Institute of Arts (INA) to learn music. I studied classical guitar. I learned new positions for the back, the hands, the fingers—the classical way. That was a new beginning for me, putting the pick down and developing the ability to play with my hand, picking with thumb and fingers, playing arpeggios. That was very important in developing my approach to the guitar, especially th acoustic guitr,the cassical guitar. I got used to the sound and feelig of nylon strings.

When I finished my studies, they asked me to become a guitar teacher. Unfortunately my own teacher died, and they asked me to replace him. Now I had the responsibility to give courses, just as my professor had done. My professor had studied in Cuba at the conservatory. He had really achieved a high level. So this was a big responsibility. If I was going to teach things to my students, I needed to have them clear in my head, step-by-step, so I would know how to teach. That gave me confidence and made me very precise in what I do with the guitar. It was no longer the school of the street. I had to write things down.

Still, I was not a professor who had studied at conservatory; I also had to teach my students the things I learned in the streets, things you don’t find in books. This was the point when I started trying to play traditional music, the music of stringed instuments suchas he kamlé n’goni—a harp, usually pen-

tatonic, with six strings, played by young people in Wassoulou, in the southern part of Mali—and the donso n’goni, the hunters’ harp, the ancestor of the kamalé n’goni. Hunters’ harps are generally pentatonic also. Then I learned some of the music of the kora [21-string harp]. That’s a Manding instrument, heptatonic, so you can play in a lot of other scales. I tried to learn songs like that to teach my students. I thought about the movement of notes in the music of kamalé n’goni and donso n’goni. There are always open strings, fixed notes. So I asked: «Can I do that on the guitar, an instrument where you have to put a finger on a fret to change the notes?» I can’t say I wanted to do exactly what these instruments did. I just wanted to get close to that movement of notes.

Did you change the tuning of the guitar to do that?

Habib KOITÉ Yes. There are a lot of guitarists in Mali, in Africa, who change the tuning of the guitar to do a particular thing. I can give you two examples. There’s a kind of hunters’ music I play in G. To play it the way I like, so that it resembles the original, I raise the high E string to F. Then if I reach my thumb around to play a G on the lowest string and put another finger on the third fret of the second string to get D, and I don’t touch any of the others, I get the notes I need. There are two songs on Fôly that use that tuning, «Ma Ya» and «Fatma.»

The second example also comes from hunters’ music, but Malinke hunters. They play an instrument called the simbi, which often plays in a minor pentatonic mode. For that, I tune the high E string to F and the B string to C. That sets me up to play in the style of the Malinke hunters. The song where I use that is «Woulaba,» [from the album Baro]. It’s not a song I play live very much, because in the studio, I added a lot of guitar parts myself.

From my time in Mali, I have the impression that a few distinct approaches to the guitar have developed. But what you do is different, whether or not you planned it that way. There’s a theory among people who have studied African guitr music that the really great innovations happen during the first few generations, when new styles are being developed. After that, everybody follows the set road, and the innovation seems to stop. What do you think about that?

Habib KOITÉ I’m not a musical historian. I can’t tell you about things that happened 50, 100 years ago. But I am convinced that things change a lot. All the instruments evolve, and the musicians who play them volve. The materil changes, nd the sound changes. There’s a mlodic base that stays the same—that’s the ethnic culture that goes with each instrument. That stays, but the player’ way of playing changes with every new generation. Look at Djelimady Tounkara, Sekou Bembeya Diabaté, Kanté Manfila, and then, a little younger, Ousmane Kouyaté. These are four of the biggest Manding guitarists. But they don’t have the same style, even though they have the same culture and come from the same world of the guitar. They did not come to the guitar by the same road, and this is why they don’t have the same sound. So I think the songs that brought me to the guitar determined my style of playing: how I will play, what I will add.

Who were the guitarists who inspired you?

Habib KOITÉ When I was young and just starting to play guitar, the guitarist who impressed me most was the guiarist for Les Amassadeurs, Kanté Manfila. I would watch him whenever he played a concert. I would hang out by the door because I didn’t have money to get in. I didn’t watch the singers. I just watched him, and that taught me a lot.

As I said, my big brother played guitar. He would sit with his friends, drinking tea and playing. He played a lot of blues, things by Jimi Hendrix. I too had my way of playing that music, blues and that. I listened to a lot of Jimi Hendrix, also David Gilmour [of Pink Floyd]. These three guitarists are the ones who first inspired me, but there have been lots of others since. With time, I learned about other guitar heroes, like Joe Satriani, people like that. And of course, I heard a lot of African guitarists, like those our I mentioned. But in West Africa, we didn’t have much feeling for guitarists in other parts of the continent. Later I learned about them. And later I discovered Earl Klugh, who’s still one of my favorites.

Like im, you play a nylon-string guiar. That’s pretty unusual for an African guitarist. How did that happen?

Habib KOITÉ The guitar we had at home had nylon strings. But I wasn’t attached to that. It wasn’t until I went to INA and studied clasical that I started to believe in the sound of nylon strings. When I startedto teach, and started adapting traditional music, I found that the sound of nylon strings was closer to the sound of many traditional instruments. Earlier I had played electric guitar, but since that time I left it aside. The sound of acoustic [guitar], especially nylon strings, creates an intimacy between a musician and the public. People are attracted to you because you don’t take an aggressive stance. If you see a musician sitting with a guitar, nylon or even steel, there’s something nice about it, peaceful. It’s a very different presentation than an electric guitar, just visally.

So I decided to stay hat way. Then when I made my group, I decided that everyone in the group should have a guitar like that. This was a difficult moment for us because nobody has a guitar in Mali. It was easier to find an electric guitar than an acoustic. And to find a nylon-string guitar you could plug into an amplifier, that wasreally hard. But that was what I wanted, and I worked hard for that.

You made your name as a singer, but everybody knows you’re a great guitarist. I’ve watched Djelimady Tounkara try to make his name as a guitarist who doesn’t sing, and he’s probably been more successful with that outside Mali than in. Even on his album, he uses singers. Why is it so hard for a guitarist to be accepted as a star in Mali just for his playing?

Habib KOITÉ This is really interesting. Mali has a great traition of song nd of percussion. The Mandigpeople played the balafon fro way back. That’s the oldest instrument. But the balafon was always there to accompany the singer. It was the singer who counted for the Manding people—the griot, the one who speaks to draw the attention of the people. The players of instruments, even if they played very beautiful things, they stayed behind in the minds of the public. It’s a phenomenon that has continued into modern times. The n’goni came. The kora came. The guitar came. We have some great guitarists, but they are always there to accompany a song or someone who speaks, and the people follow the line of the story and the feeling of the voice above all.

The guitarists are known. Who doesn’t know Djelimady? But is he a star? Normally, someone as well known among us as Djelimady would be solicited all the time to give his knowledge to others. But the people who direct culture in our country on’t think about that aspect o things. A grat guitarist like Djelimadywhen he plays, it makes me cy—but he doesn’t get the recognition. Among us, the singers have everything. Especially the griots, but things are changing. People have to live. If you are having a party, you have to call musicians, and they are capable of saying to you, «How much are you going to pay me?»

So things are getting better for instrumentalists in Mali?

Habib KOITÉ Yes, with the development of the music industry. We’re still far from Europe and Amrica, but it’s starting. With the creation of many studios, there is a need for musicians. There the musician can be a king. If you are a singer and you want to make a record, you need to find musicians.

The other problem is authors’ rights. When a musician is called for a recording, he usually gets paid one time, and that’s it. But there are a fe instrumen-taists who understand about nterpretation, arrangement, and the importance of having this written down at the time of recording. We have some great arrangers, but in the past they didn’t think about that. Musicians need to earn more than just their pay for each concert. This is why we started writing, since the second album, author/composer: Habib Koité, arranger: Habib Koité and Bamada. So if there’s money for the arranger, it goes to the group. This helps to keep everyone together.

