

# Habib Koité

The Malian stalwart has finally got around to a new album. **Michael Stone** catches up with him in New York.

**A**nticipating his first studio release in six years, *Afriki* (Cumbancha CMB-CD-5; see *fR293*), Habib Koité recently passed through New York, joining new label mate and 2007 Womex award-winner Andy Palacio, to sing at a West Village fundraiser for a documentary on Central American Garifuna music. Recognising an immediate diasporic connection, Koité enthused, "I want to go to Belize! The Garifuna are really into something!"

The response exemplifies Koité's abiding interest in traditional musics, beginning with his native Mali. Producer Jacob Edgar remarks, "Habib is open to western influences, but he also has a pan-Malian perspective. His knowledge of Malian genres is broad and deep, not least because he taught for so long at the Bamako conservatory."

Koité's voracious musical curiosity, broad international fan base, impressive CD sales, and fruitful collaboration with the likes of Bonnie Raitt ("My grand-sister," he says fondly), Jackson Browne, Eric Bibb, and Gary Davis, have made him a prominent global voice. But success brings its own creative complications. "The last six years have been very busy, touring a lot, a lot, a lot. My life keeps changing, and I'm never in the same place. I needed someone to wake me up, to tell me to make a new album."

Enter Jacob Edgar. The UCLA-trained ethnomusicologist, long-time A&R rep at Putumayo (Koité's former label), and old friend, recently launched Cumbancha Records. *Afriki* is Cumbancha's com-

PELLING follow-up to Palacio's critically acclaimed *Wátina*. Koité: "Jacob's insistence took me by surprise, saying it was time to make a new album, because I've just been touring so much."

Koité elaborates, "On the road, I don't have time to create new music. Being abroad so much, it takes me a while to get into the creative mood. I want to work with Malian traditions, but to make something new with them. Taking a certain ethnic genre, I want to respect it, to sing in the native language, and do it very well, so when people listen, they can be proud of their traditions – many of which are threatened in Mali today."

**"I want to work with Malian traditions, but to make something new with them."**

"Mali is my country – my wife, my kids, and my house are there. People are always visiting one another. When someone comes to your home, it's customary to stop working and talk with them, not like in Europe or the States. At home I'm always busy, because I see my family so rarely. We are seventeen brothers and sisters altogether, plus their kids! I also have my own business. I'm busy at home, but not because I'm creating new music."

"Still, I have to give something back to my fans, in Mali and abroad, to make time to create. I had to change how I work to be able to keep making new music. Now I take my laptop on the road. In my hotel room, I record ideas for new sounds, guitar tracks, percussion patterns, things like that. Then, when I go into the studio, I play it back and the musicians have something to work with. *Afriki* was made in a Bamako studio, in two Belgian studios, and finished in Vermont, at Cumbancha. My voice was in good shape, and I'm very happy with the result."

What's different about *Afriki*? "Take the song *Nta Dima*. I was in southern Mali, talking with some older musicians. They told me the young don't want to play the old music, so I worked with them, using their traditions." The universal thematic result: a lingering male chorus conveying the ardent concerns of a father seeking a husband worthy of his daughter.

The title track, sung in Bambara, has a brass section headed by Pee Wee Ellis, James Brown's nonpareil saxophonist. "It was wonderful to be able to work with Pee Wee. I hope he can join us on tour. *Afriki* is about the modern encounter between Europeans and West Africans. So many promises, but they never deliver. Malians are so welcoming, but when the young try to go to Europe, the doors are closed. It makes me angry and sad. I want to make people believe in Africa, and work to improve the future. We have waited long enough. The UN promised to end poverty, to fight AIDS and infant mortality, but we keep waiting."

Are Habib's fans ready for this message? "Well, when our young people try to cross the Mediterranean or the Atlantic for a better life, when we see the bodies of the dead who don't make it, we must do something. We shouldn't be seeing these young people dying on the road in this way. Why are they leaving their native homes? That's what people need to understand, so Africans themselves can believe in Africa, so things can change. Africa will make its own way."

From one who has helped promote Oxfam's effort to address global poverty, these are not idle words. "I thank my fans, and trust they will hear this message. My hope is for Africa to gain world attention and for people young and old to really think about the global future." Fittingly, the closing track, *Titati* (Rocking), is a muted guitar instrumental inspired by the Mandinka proverb, "Try to know those who love you", encapsulating the fierce but tender spirit of a thoughtful, compassionate and uncompromising artist.

www.habibkoite.com



Photo: Ziga Kortnik