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The Best in World Music

Mamadou Diabate – Biography

Mamadou Diabate was born in 1975 in Kita, a Malian city long known as a center for the arts and culture of the Manding people of West Africa. As the name Diabate indicates, Mamadou comes from a family of griots, or jelis as they are known among the Manding. Jelis are more than just traditional musicians. They use music and sometimes oratory to preserve and sustain people's consciousness of the past, a past that stretches back to the 13th century when the Manding king Sunjata Keita consolidated the vast Empire of Mali, covering much of West Africa. The stories of these glory days and the times since remain important touchstones for people today, not only for the Manding, but for many citizens of Mali, Guinea, Gambia, and Senegal. So to be born to a distinguished jeli family in Kita is already an auspicious beginning.

Mamadou's father Djelimory played the kora, the jeli's venerable 21-string harp. He was widely known as N'fa Diabate, performing in the Instrumental Ensemble of Mali and recording on the National Radio of Mali. At the age of four, Mamadou went to live with his father in Bamako, where the Ensemble was based. When it came time for him to return to Kita and go to school, Mamadou knew that the kora was his destiny. His father had taught him how to play the instrument, and from there he listened and watched and devoted himself to practicing the kora, to the point that his mother worried that he was not concentrating enough on school. When she took it away, it only reduced his interest in studying, and he quickly resorted to making his own kora so he could continue.

Before long, Mamadou left school and began playing kora for local jeli singers, and traveling throughout the region to play at the ceremonies where modern jelis ply their trade, mostly weddings and baptisms. When he was fifteen, Mamadou won first prize for his kora playing in a regional competition and instantly became something of a local celebrity. The next year, he went to Bamako, and under the tutelage of his famous kora playing cousin, Toumani Diabate, he worked the jeli circuit, backing singers at neighborhood weddings and baptisms and entertaining the powerful at the city's posh Amitié Hotel. Toumani gave his cousin the nickname "Djelika Djan" meaning "Tall Griot," a reference to Mamadou's impressive physical stature. The name has stuck.

In 1996, a touring group from the Instrumental Ensemble of Mali offered Mamadou the chance to travel to the United States with a group of Manding musicians and cultural authorities. Following a successful tour, Mamadou stayed in the United States to advance his career and now calls it home. Mamadou performs nationally and internationally as a soloist. He also leads the Mamadou Diabate Ensemble, which includes himself on kora, Balla Kouyate on balafon, Baye Kouyate on talking drum and calabash, and Noah Jarrett on bass.

Mamadou is a musical adventurer who has collaborated broadly with jazz musicians from Donald Byrd to Randy Weston, as well as popular figures from Afropop star Angelique Kidjo and Zimbabwean legend Thomas Mapfumo to blues mavericks Taj Mahal and Eric Bibb, and even the jam band Donna the Buffalo. He gets frequent invitations to perform with visiting Malian stars including grand divas such as Ami Koita, Tata Bambo Kouyate, Kandia Kouyate, and Babani Koné. Nationally he has performed at the United Nations, Lincoln Center, the Metropolitan Museum, and at the Smithsonian Institute and for National Geographic in Washington, DC. Since 2000 his appearances have been well received at major world music and folk festivals around the United States. His international tours have taken him to England, France, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Spain, Canada, and back to Mali.

In 2000, Mamadou recorded his debut *Tunga* (Alula), which means “adventure,” and this wide ranging, collaborative work served as the calling card of a most adventurous musician. By 2003, when he recorded *Behmanka* (World Village), Mamadou had married and settled in Durham, North Carolina. Here, in the tradition of his cousin, Toumani, Mamadou challenged himself to make a solo recording, one that would demonstrate his profound knowledge of tradition, his mastery of his instrument, and his personal innovations as a player. It is a tour de force, and it earned him a Grammy Award nomination in 2005. In 2006 Mamadou released another ensemble album, *Heritage* (World Village). In the following year, American Folk Alliance awarded him World Music Artist of the Year, 2007.

Mamadou says that his father advised him to listen to all the best kora players and to learn from each one. The kora itself came to Mali from Gabu, the region centered between Gambia, Senegal, and Guinea Bissau, and the Malian kora tradition has always put a premium on holding onto the old ways while constantly innovating and developing the art.