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The Best in World Music

Mamadou Diabate CD Reviews – *Douga Mansa*

Global Rhythm – September 18, 2008
James Rogers

For his fourth release, and second one without accompaniment, Malian kora player Mamadou Diabate builds a swirling, undulating and complex wall of sound out of those 21 strings. The notes come fast and furious at times, washing over the listener in a gush of melody, but then there are moments where things are like a slow and steady rain. With eight traditional instrumentals and four others written or co-written by Diabate, the album pays respect to the griot tradition of his homeland, while also adding influences from his time living in the U.S., collaborating with artists in the jazz and blues genres. His speed is astonishing and his skills on the instrument impressive, but the music never truly grabs the listener or pushes for attention, seemingly content to pour from the speakers and fill the room with a musical glow. This is world music for a relaxing day that will make you feel fresh and alive.

Condé Nast Traveler – October 30, 2008
John Oseid

The fine World Village label just released *Douga Mansa*, a lush new album by another respected Malian artist, Mamadou Diabate. Diabate plays the kora, a 21-string harp with a gourd base, that to my ear sounds something like a harpsichord. I have great memories of sitting in cafes in Bamako listening to skillful kora players create some of the most achingly lovely sounds I've ever heard. On *Douga Mansa*, Diabate innovates off of traditional songs, but uses no overdubbing. His cascading kora notes on "Bi Allah La Ke" put me in a seven-minute trance. In the album liner essay, music writer Banning Eyre of Afropop Worldwide notes that Diabate studied his countrymen's kora techniques on YouTube while living in the States. We're entering a whole new world of vibrant connections.

Lucid Culture – October 13, 2008

The expat Malian kora virtuoso's fourth CD, his first solo album, takes its title from his father Djelima N'fa Diabate's instrumental that served for many years as the theme to the six o'clock news on Radio Mali. Perhaps ironically, it was written to evoke the West African vulture, representing patience...as it waits for the death of its prey. Yet the piece is hardly macabre: like the rest of this CD, it's a briskly optimistic, glimmering thicket of spiky kora textures. While Diabate *files* plays his West African harp solo throughout, he frequently sounds like a whole orchestra of them. In another stroke of irony, since emigrating to the US, he's been able to explore the work of previous kora virtuosos that would have been next to impossible to view in his native land via sites like youtube. Perhaps as a result, Diabate has picked up the pace: if it can be said that a kora player can shred, Diabate shreds here. Lightning-fast glissandos, trills and clusters of triplets everywhere, and the effect is absolutely, viscerally adrenalinizing. Where he comes from, this is party music. As Diabate plays it here, the kora is tuned so that its intervals work in the western major scale - this is fun, upbeat stuff. Western ears will notice that most of the melody appears in the lower registers, with all that lightning-fast freneticism further up the scale.

Depending on the placement of the note, the interval or the attack that Diabate uses on the strings, his kora will sometimes take on the plunk of a banjo, the clink of a kanun or cimbalom or even the round tone of a note on the piano. Perhaps the most dazzling display here is the CD's ninth cut, Kora Mali, a traditional number that was especially popular in the 60s. The most memorable tune is the following cut, Segou Tara, a stately, striking ode to a late 19th century Fulani warlord. Fans of the more upbeat Windham Hill catalog will love this, as will adventurous bluegrass fans... Or for that matter any fretted instrument player with the ambition to wrap his or her fingers around Diabate's blazing licks. If the CD is any indication, he ought to be sensationally good live...

Musikifan – Best 9 CDs of 2008
Alastair Johnston

There are kora discs and then there are kora discs. Kora is like classical guitar: there are musicians like Andres Segovia who have their devotees, whereas others prefer John Williams, Manitas de Plata or Julian Bream. I like Alhaji Bai Konte and Jali Musa Jawara. It's a matter of taste, but the repertoire doesn't vary much. And unless you are a fanatic you don't really need a lot of kora records, the way you absolutely need a lot of Congolese rumba records, say. Mamadou Diabate grew up in a Mande griot family (his father Djelimory was one of the founders of the Instrumental Ensemble of Mali) and has been playing the 21-stringed instrument all his life. When he was 22, Mamadou moved to the USA (after defecting from a successful Instrumental Ensemble tour) and became more exposed to jazz, blues and pop, collaborating with Randy Weston, Taj Mahal, and Angelique Kidjo, among others. For his fourth album, his second solo, he has gone back to the traditional repertoire. Mamadou attacks the strings with passion and his fingers fly. To me he is a superior talent and I would rank him above Foday Musa Suso or his famous cousin Toumani Diabate. But I prefer Red Garland to Art Tatum, so again make up your own mind. But you just have to hear this album to realize he a brilliant creative artist. And despite his move to North Carolina there is no fusion or borrowing in this set. It's all recorded in one take, without overdubbing, the liner assures us, because otherwise we wouldn't believe it, so sweeping is the flood of scales, the torrent of fluid riffs.

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