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'We are all brothers'

Toumani Diabaté's teaming up with Ali Farka Touré has been hailed as one of the African music events of the year. Here Diabaté, the world's finest kora player, talks to Robin Denselow about the collaboration

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[The Guardian](#)

He is a genius of African music, the finest living exponent of the kora, the stately and stirring 21-stringed harp that is the most important classical instrument in west Africa. He also has a reputation for being wildly unpredictable. But now, Toumani Diabaté is set for an unprecedented flurry of activity that should finally establish his reputation as one of the most exhilarating instrumentalists in the world. Returning to play in Britain after a lengthy absence, he will be accompanied by another legendary figure of African music, Ali Farka Touré, the leading exponent of African desert blues who, in recent years seems to have taken more of an interest in farming than in his distinctive guitar work.



Diabaté: hasn't recorded an album for six years. Now he's about to release three

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Diabaté comes from a centuries-old caste of traditional musicians, the griots. But he has been so concerned with preserving traditional culture and developing new musical styles back home in Mali that it seemed that he, like Touré, was losing interest in the west. It has been six years since he last got round to recording an album. Now, that's all going to change, for Diabaté has suddenly recorded three new albums, all of them very different.

The first album to be released will be his series of duets with Touré, *In the Heart of the Moon*, which can already be judged as one of the key African albums of the year. Touré's guitar work varies between the stately, the bluesy and the positively jaunty, and against this Diabaté adds his dazzling kora work, at times picking out the melody and then suddenly veering off into his extraordinary and exquisite passages of musical embroidery and improvisation.

The two men come from very different traditions within Mali, with Diabaté playing the griot music of the old Mande Empire that once controlled this part of West Africa, and Touré famous for the more northern styles of his home town, Niafunke, which he insists provided the roots of the blues. They have scarcely played together before, but the kora player and guitarist were brought together by Nick Gold of World Circuit records. He had persuaded Touré to record for him and suggested that Diabaté might make an appearance on a couple of tracks. The result was so successful that a full album of instrumental duets followed.

The record was made in three days, with subtle contributions from the likes of Ry Cooder and the great Cuban bass player Cachaito Lopez added in later. The preparation had taken a little longer. Diabaté said he "didn't want to lose the ambience and the way the music is played in Mali", and so a mobile studio was set up in the Hotel Mande, in the Malian capital, Bamako.

The material, according to Diabaté, includes "songs from the

griot tradition, my compositions, Ali's songs and songs that were popular in the 1950s and 1960s". Debe is a griot song that Diabaté said was "more than 500 years old", while the easy-going, tuneful Monsieur le Maire de Niafunke was written by Toumani Diabaté to congratulate Touré on his appointment as the town's mayor. In doing so, he was following an age-old family tradition, for "praise songs" were always an important part of the griot repertoire. But in a culture that originally had no written records, these hereditary musicians had an even more important role, as custodians of the Mande Empire's history.

His own repertoire, passed down from generation to generation, includes many hundreds of songs, and he is now using his music to re-create the unity of the old Mande region. Every Friday night, at a rather sparse outdoor Bamako club known as the Hogon, Toumani makes a late-night appearance with a band called the Symmetric Orchestra. It includes traditional and modern instruments, and musicians both from Mali and neighbouring states. The aim, he said, is to culturally re-form the old West African Mande Empire: "So I have players from Guinea Conakry and Guinea-Bissau, from the Ivory Coast, and from Burkina Faso. Mali was the centre of the old empire, and so I don't want people to say, 'This is music from Senegal or Mauritania' - it's all from the same country and the same culture, before the French and the British carved it up. We have a lot of problems in Africa, but we are all brothers from the same family and it's not necessary for us to fight."

Taking advantage of the mobile studio set-up at the Hotel Mande, Diabaté went on to record a second album, with the Symmetric Orchestra, while Touré also made a second CD, this time with his band of traditional n'goni players. The two albums will be released after *In the Heart of the Moon*.

Diabaté is a very modern griot virtuoso, and still young, considering his history and reputation. He was born in 1965, the son of the great kora master Sidiki Diabaté, who became known as the "king of the kora" across West Africa and played in Mali's National Instrumental Ensemble along with Toumani's mother, the singer Nene Koita. Sidiki Diabaté may have been a kora genius, but he didn't teach his son. Toumani had to learn how to play himself, and yet when he was 21 he recorded *Kaira*, his much-praised solo album, in a single afternoon.

Since then he has collaborated with many celebrated musicians. One collaboration that didn't work so well was with Damon Albarn, who included the track *4am* at Toumani's, featuring Diabaté's kora work, on his *Mali Music* album. When Albarn went out to Mali three years ago to rehearse with local musicians for his live treatment of the project, he had expected Diabaté to play a key role, and with good reason. In Bamako at the time, Diabaté told me that he and Albarn were "creating a new music together that no one has done before". Diabaté then failed to turn up for rehearsals, though he did appear at a local warm-up show, and never came to London for the *Mali Music* concert. Now he argues that his music should never have appeared on Albarn's album, complaining "they just came

to my guest house and we had a jam session and they put it on the record - that was not good".

This time round it seems that Toumani Diabaté will certainly appear to launch the first of his three new albums. The final recording was, he said, "recorded in two hours, with no overdubs, just like my first solo album". He promises that this new solo set will be very different again. "People will be able to see how much experience I have had in the last 18 years. I got married, had kids, played over 2,000 kora concerts, and now I teach kora at the Mali Conservatory of Music. The way I play on this solo album is totally different to the classic kora styles. I'm sometimes using scales that are hundreds of years old, from Egypt, but have a connection with Malian tunings." That album, too, will almost certainly not be released until next year. By then, I suspect, he and Touré will already be picking up awards for the first release from their unexpected and historic recording spree. The ancient music of the Mande Empire lives on.

• Ali Farka Touré and Toumani Diabaté: *In the Heart of the Moon* is released on June 27 by World Circuit. They play the Barbican, London EC2, on June 29. Box office: 020-7638 8891

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