

SALIF KEITA

Salif Keita, the long-time ambassador of Malian music, first met producer Philippe Cohen Solal (Gotan Project), in January 2011. Philippe remembers that the first thing Salif said to him about the album was: *"I want it to dance!"* and Philippe wanted to make a dance record, so they got off to a very good start.

Both Salif and Philippe wanted to breathe new life into the Mandingo tradition. *"I've had enough of playing it safe and being labelled as just another African musician,"* says Salif. *"Philippe's approach suited me: he loves traditional instruments, so we kept that sound but injected a new flavour."*

Doing what he does best, Philippe sat down in his studio to concoct his latest *pièce de résistance*, a retro-futuristic sound-clash that fuses organic, primitive sounds with contemporary electronic rhythms with a hint of irreverence and a lot of conviction.

"I never like music to repeat itself but this time I really wanted to take the plunge," says Salif, who since his rise to fame with the Griots in 1969, has often strayed from the conventional route. In his career, he has explored Afro Pop, Salsa-with-a-Twist, rhythmical funk and even Afro-Jazz-Rock in his more recent collaborations with Joe Zawinul and Carlos Santana.

This latest disc does exactly that; immersing us in the digital fountain of youth, with a sound that references *Remain in Light* by Brian Eno and Talking Heads – artists who pioneered their own future with their quest into the sounds of West Africa.

Philippe found working on the album really inspiring. But far from copying it note-for-note, he teased out its spirit to create an otherworldly soundtrack. *"You think you're taking the music somewhere, but it's the music that's guiding you; it's the music that decides where to stop or when to keep on exploring."* It seems to bridge a gap between the past and the future, fans of hard-core electro and world music. *"We want to pave the way for people to discover this whole continent of new music."*

There was no question of trying a simple remix album; the point was to stick to the true song format and adapt it for the dance-floor.

Simple guitar and voice tapes from Salif lay the foundations for the album's melodies and harmonies. Rhythmical motifs are woven in and out by local musicians Aboussi Cissoko (n'goni), Mamane Diabaté (balafon), Prince (calabash). They are joined by Cyril Atef from Bumcello on the drums and percussions, Hagar Ben Ari, The Dap Kings's deep-soul bassist, and Christophe Chassol with his 'Philly-sound' string-arrangements.

The featured artists and Philippe's 'less notes, more effects' approach accentuate Salif's natural talent: *"There are few singers like Salif. He can put his voice to extremely complicated melodies, and add a perfect overdub. His second vocal was so precise that even he couldn't hear it in the mix."*

Salif was joined in the studio by special guests Manu Dibango and his awesome sax-chorus, and Bobby McFerrin, who improvised a soft melody on the simbi over Salif's beat-boxing. The Grammy Award-winning artist, Esperanza Spalding, featured on the song *"Chérie s'en va"* - a dedication to young girls who leave home to marry. And British prodigy Roots Manuva's flow is captured on *"C'est bon c'est bon"*, a Lee Perry-type production filled with warp-speed, rock-steady infra-bass and soulful backing vocals.

The exciting result pushes musical boundaries. The distinctive sound of the calabash takes us back to the sound of Seventies Disco, while the sticky afro-beats transport us to Detroit. Elsewhere, we

hear the haunting the sounds of the Gnawas' guembri and their metal qraqebs or Egyptian orchestrations being sampled in the middle of "Yala". In the dramatic "Tassy", written about a Bamako woman whose son was executed in the US, Philippe summons the Cumbia genre, with two Cubans – Pity Cabrera on piano and Frank Rubio on bass – and those subtle funky n'goni sounds.

"Tassy" plays on the striking contrast present in this album, conveying the paradox of today's world. Between the lines, Salif speaks with the voice of a sovereign. Although he may be singing odes of love, beneath the veneer, Salif points out the excesses of the powerful and the wealthy, putting them firmly, yet gracefully in their place.

Salif clearly prefers the laughter of children, and the wild fun they have on the streets of Bamako. These children introduce the song "Natty", named after his youngest daughter. In it, like a grown-up, as tall as her tender years, she says to him: "*Je t'aime*" / "*m'bifé*" His answer, which is full of love and with a note of humour, is symbolic of the record and puts Papa Keita back where he belongs!

SALIF KEITA "TALÉ" - Produced by Philippe Cohen Solal