

Salif Keita review – unplugged but still electric

By Kitty Empire

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In western music a battle has long raged between authenticity and pop, pedigreed tradition and brash party fodder. We've cheerfully dragged the rest of the globe into this fraught binary, one spotlighted by Malian superstar Salif Keita's acoustic tour. What is it, exactly, that western audiences want from our west African (or west Andean or west Aleutian) stars? Is it traditional music with *terroir* and pedigree, ideally untainted by modernity? Something with unpronounceable instrumentation, tuned to a different scale? Or the music that the artist's compatriots want to listen to, often full of brash synths and production wizardry?

Over a lifetime, Keita has produced both strands of world music. He's been a pop phenomenon in his native Mali, a status achieved not because his clan were traditional musicians, but despite it. (Keita comes from an imperial family – imagine Prince Charles taking up the guitar and singing for a living.) Keita has since become one of the emblems of "world" by dint of satisfying both audiences, the fusion-fanciers and the fundamentalists.

Even before the venerable man comes on tonight, it's plain that this is not a customary Keita gig. Alone on the stage, one Mamadou Diabaté is plucking at a kora, unleashing little waterfalls of jewelled descending notes. He is the younger brother of the more famous (in the west, at least) Toumani, and no slouch at all in the family kora-playing tradition which dates back 70 generations. Soon, the dextrous Diabaté is joined by the rest of the band. It's slightly bijou by west African standards – just an n'goni player, Souleymane Kouyaté, who wears a little Mona Lisa smile for the entire evening; Keita's longtime fellow-traveller, the sixtysomething Ousmane Kouyaté, on electric guitar, whose stiff but authoritative dancing finally gets people on their feet; a percussionist, Guy Nwogang, permanently in shades, doing the work of three men; and two dulcet-voiced backing singers.

This is Keita's 2014 acoustic tour. It packs relatively little of the Parisian émigré pop inflections of his 30-year back catalogue, and even less of the disco pizzazz of 2013's *Talé* album. It's Salif Keita unplugged (well, mostly – Diabaté also unleashes occasional pre-recorded elements, samples and keyboard lines). Keita gone trad.

It's also a sedate affair, at least at first. The kora, guitar and n'goni trade melodies eloquently, rearranging songs from Keita's ample back catalogue. A pair of openers set the scene; the better-known M'Bemba is a track that could justifiably go on forever tonight, such is the fluid ease of its groove. Usually armed with a guitar, Keita confines himself to singing, using his hands conversationally, as though further explaining the points his extraordinary voice is making.

In a short YouTube video that announced the tour, Diabaté referred to Keita as a "*rossignol*" (nightingale), a designation that does the vocalist's undiminished agility more credit than being lauded – as he customarily is – as the Golden Voice of Africa. Tonight, Keita does sad, particularly on Kanté, the elegy for his former colleague, Kanté Manfila, guitarist in Les Ambassadeurs, the Malian outfit that launched them both. He does sultry and he does declamatory and impassioned.

Taking their cue from the seated musicians, the Barbican patrons are attentive but lounging. Things heat up when the backing vocalists kick away their stools and Yamoré – Keita's terrific 2002 duet with Cesaria Evora – announces that he is not done with pop music by any stretch. The tune's former Spanish guitar solo is handed over to Diabaté, who obliges with even wilder flurries of kora string-play. Despite the (beautiful, lyrical) emphasis on kora and n'goni tonight, Ousmane Kouyaté's guitar licks can go entertainingly prog rock at times, while the canned keyboard lines tend towards the candy-coloured. It's all to the good.

It's impossible to read the significance of this acoustic tour. As he tells it, Keita just craved some more melody around him. It could be that, having done an album and world tour full of party music with western-leaning collaborators (with Gotan Project's Philippe Cohen Solal producing) in 2013, Keita felt like doing the opposite: taking things down a notch, bringing them back home. Mali is currently exiting a horrific period in which Islamist insurgents captured parts of the country, banning all music – a particularly painful state of affairs there, where music is both lifeblood and prime export. The militias have since been driven out by French forces, but normality remains some way off in west Africa. There's a new, unnamed song in Keita's encore that ends the show with a cacophonous flourish. It may have no bearing on recent political affairs, but it feels joyously defiant all the same.

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