

Habib Koite & Bamada Afrika Review

By Martin Longley
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This is the Malian singer and guitarist's first studio album for six years. Koité is supposedly a slow worker because he's a studio craftsman who pays great attention to sonic detail. Listening to Afrika, this is surely the case, as it's a finely-drawn work of studied acoustic arrangements, with more of an emphasis on organic naturalness than its 2001 predecessor Baro. Although relatively unknown on these shores, Koité has sold wagonloads of albums in the USA, and appears to devote much of his touring time to the rest of Europe. Soon, his time will come in the UK... Koité formed his Bamada band in 1988, deriving from the nickname given to residents of Bamako. He started to receive increased attention in the States after collaborating with Bonnie Raitt and appearing on the Dave Letterman show.

Even though Koité's delivery could be deemed mellow, this quality is not at the expense of an innate Malian folksiness. His voice is deep and smooth, although Koité has the range to encompass a Fela Kuti-ish roughness on some of the songs. The balafon (marimba) is a prominent element, but Koité also utilises Anglo-American song construction and production languages to present his Malian essence with an sense of expert balance. This is why he's such a successful crossover artist...

Koité's rich, honeyed vocals and detailed guitar figures always lie at the heart of each song, but he also invites a broad spread of colours that include violin (both rough and smooth), subliminal mood-bass and a varied percussion array. There are also stray appearances made by n'goni and some hoarse hunting horns...

"N'ba" has a soft reggae lilt, "Mali Ba" is sparsely lit, with harmonica shadings, and "N'Teri" has a more uplifting vibration, with tinglesome female backing vocals responding to Koité's lines whilst strings make sweepingly elaborate gestures. The album closes in a typically varied fashion, with "Titati", an acoustic guitar meditation.

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