

Salif Keita, Royal Festival Hall, London

Independent

February 13, 2013

Salif Keita found fame with the Rail Band of Bamako in the late 1960s, then with the Ambassadeurs. Both revelled in combining Afro-Cuban and native elements, with their classic line-up of electric guitar, balafon, kora and brass.

In 1977 he left Mali for Abidjan, then settled in Paris, and in 1987 released the electro-Afropop smash that was *Soro*. Since then he's delivered fusion albums alongside more rootsy, acoustic sets, such as 2009's acclaimed *La Difference* - toured as part of the African Soul Rebels the following year - while his new album, *Talé*, has had a mixed reception.

At the Royal Festival Hall, The Golden Voice led a five-piece band including ngoni player Harouna Samake, Prince on calabash and Africa Express member Morike Keita, AKA DJ Mo on a raised matt-black dias whose rack of keyboards and laptops fills the centre and dominates the band's sound. Salif Keita took centre stage, falling to his knees at first, to receive his audience, before walking into a bracing vocal on the late 1970s vintage of *Mandjou*, lit from behind in a dramatic chiaroscuro by energetically deployed stage lighting.

It's a dense ensemble music, the swift rhythms shifting and molassing under Keita's remarkable voice. On "Le Difference", he unleashes a lion of a vocal, with a power that reaches to the back of the house. Then he changes pace, and makes an appeal to the audience - not for peace in Mali or anything like that, but for us all to sing Happy Birthday to him. "Thank you for coming," he cries. "Some people know about me but I don't know my birthday - the month, the day, or the year. So I choose today as my birthday."

The audience is his after that, and through the likes of "Yamore" from Grammy-nominated 2002 album *Moffou*, to the best cuts from the new album - the synth earworm that is *Talé*, and "Samfi", on which he steps up to deliver a great vocal - there is much to love, even if the nuances of his live band's sound is sometimes flattened by the squelch of DJ Mo's synths and programmed beats.

By the end, he's pulling up audience members to become stage dancers, the house is on its feet, the talking drum is out, and if it may not be the best Salif Keita concert, that Golden Voice carries a wider spectrum of emotions than all the rest. He's a global musical traveller, a veteran with Malian roots and though his experiments do not always prosper, that voice always hits home.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/reviews/salif-keita-royal-festival-hall-london-8494712.html>