

3MA's Superstar African Improvisers Blend Their Hypnotic Powers

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The trio of Malian kora player Ballake Sissoko, Moroccan oudist Driss El Maloumi and Malagasy valiha harp player Rajery – are an African supergroup. Their popularity and influence stems from how the three – each a popular solo performer and highly sought out collaborator – have developed a distinctive, hypnotically intertwining group sound. Their new album *Anarouz* is streaming at **Spotify**. It's music to get lost in.

Although there are places on the album where the melody edges toward the Middle East, or the Sahara, or East Africa, it's seldom genre-specific. These guys aren't the African Dead Weather: individual voices typically take a backseat to collective improvisational genius.

The album opens with the title track: listen closely for how artfully El Maloumi takes a simple riff in the blues scale and develops very subtle variations beneath the rippling interweave overhead. There are jaunty exchanges between Sissoko and Rajery, each leaving plenty of space for the other's tantalizingly brief solos.

Hanatra, a vocal number, has a suspenseful, insistent pulse and is also grounded in a catchy blues hook. The trio use that same minor-key riff as a springboard for solos in Lova, a magical acoustic duskcore number that suddenly hits a pulsing crescendo fueled by Rajery's delicately incisive solo.

Samedi Glace – “Saturday ice Cream” – is a brisk, strolling vamp, the trio in perfect sync with their catchy, dancing phrases. While Rajery takes the first spiky solo in Anfaz, there are flickers where the oud pulls the music subtly toward edgy Arabic modes. Yet when it's El Maloumi's turn to solo, it's mostly with voicings from sub-Saharan kora music.

Sissoko's spiraling lines take centerstage early in Moustique, an allusively gorgeous, Middle Eastern-tinged number, El Maloumi edging toward proto-blues amid the trance-inducing thicket of notes. Mariam is a gorgeous, hauntingly rising and falling nocturne with a long, suspenseful El Maloumi solo at the center – it's the high point of the album. Aretina is the catchiest track here, raising the question of whether music like this is the roots of African-American soul music, or a refraction of it back from the old country.

El Maloumi's misterioso opening taqsim kicks off the joyously bouncy Jiharka, the group running the catchy chorus in unison. The album concludes on a raptly peaceful note with Awal, a twinkling deep-desert nocturne. This is the kind of magic that happens when borders get broken down.

Fun fact: the bandname is a pun on the word “trauma.” Say “3MA” in French.

Source: <https://newyorkmusicdaily.wordpress.com/2017/12/29/3ma/>