

MAMADOU KELLY: POLITIKI

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The desert meets the Deep South on *Politiki*, guitarist Mamadou Kelly's latest work. Kelly tops off hypnotic Malian grooves with a Mississippi delta twang, putting his nimble fingers to good effect. His easy music sounds like it owes almost as much to the folk roots of early rock and roll as it does to the rich traditional sounds and infectious Afropop of West Africa.

In Kelly's voice is the seasoning and depth of a much older man; although this is only his third record, he has backed the famed Ali Farka Touré, and he makes the songs he plays very much his own. As quick as he and his backup band can play, the music is always soothing—there's no stress on this collection, no racing moments that leave you unsure if Kelly can keep up. Instead, we get less jumping and more swaying; less tension and more comfort. The emotions that flow through are generally gentle ones, even on tracks like "I'Sagnanote" or "La vie ce n'est que deux jours", where heavy electric guitar drives the rolling melody forward. On "Nakaam", this electricity is coupled with the bright twang of sunny Afropop guitar for one of the most high-energy moments of the album.

Yet, for the most part, Kelly's music stays away from being too intense in any direction. For instance, "Politiki" itself exemplifies all the strengths of the album. With its warm midtempo groove, it sounds like open space, with acoustic guitar spreading out in slow country waves over grasslands and desert. Throughout the disc, Kelly sticks to his strengths, and while that may sound like a good thing, it's actually the album's one weakness. Rather than switch things up, he rests on his laurels. It's not like the Sahara scene is lacking for innovation, either; in the first third of this year alone, Tinariwen and Tamikrest have soared outside the box with hard rock and roll. Likewise, last year Imarhan and Bombino went vibrant with reggae and Arabic tones, while Noura Mint Seymali went full robot rock. In comparison, Kelly simply doesn't take risks here (even his country-rock flourishes are safe decor).

Of course, there's the perspective that if it ain't broke, why fix it? Kelly does nothing wrong on *Politiki*; his performance is grounded and sincere, and his sounds pleasant and earthy. It's more a matter of what's missing: a spark, something that grabs and captivates. Kelly has the technical skills and love for his craft, but in the wide world of Afropop, it takes more than that to really stand out. What Kelly does is enough to fill a little time with a handful of nice songs, and he blends together some lovely sounds, but as previous albums have shown, there's much more he can do. *Politiki* only gives us a taste of it.

You can't go too wrong with *Politiki*. It's a peaceful ride full of classic world music sounds; every track is clean and soft. Listening to it feels good, plain and simple. Yes, there could be more fire and spice and edge to it, but the clear and natural beauty Mamadou Kelly gives us instead is mighty fine on its own. After all, it's nice to have music that isn't too challenging once and awhile.

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