

Ballake Sissoko, Driss El Maloumi, Rajery - 3MA

By: Charlie Gillett
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Given the choice of listening for the first time to new albums by two unknown artists, one instrumental, the other vocal, I instinctively opt for the one with words. Days or weeks later, finally succumbing to the silent reproach of the still unheard instrumental album, I give it a chance to make its case. Most often, prejudice is reinforced, as virtuosos prove their dexterity without breaking new ground. But every now and then there's a surprise, the discovery of a group of musicians whose aim is not to impress but to connect, both with each other and with the unseen listener. For reasons I can't quite get to the bottom of, the line-up that seems most likely to achieve this balance is a trio without a drummer.

The first drummer-less trio to knock me sideways were the Jimmy Giuffre Trio with 'The Train and The River' back in 1957. Jimmy blew breathy clarinet into a seemingly endless loop of picked guitar and plucked bass notes. Rhythmic, melodic, full of air and space, it became an underground secret that hooked a few of us into believing we were jazz fans for a while, until we discovered that there was nothing else quite like it, in jazz or anywhere else.

This album by three African string-pluckers follows in that tradition, satisfyingly unclassifiable. It has the same sense of musicians listening to each other with ears wide open, taking turns to play the leading melody before dropping back to provide the rhythmic pulse while the others trade phrases. There are a lot of strings attached, but they never compromise each other.

Visually, the three instruments could hardly be more different. The valiha is a simple bamboo pole with 20 strings running its length, usually made from unwound bicycle brake cables. Although it requires great dexterity, the Malagasy musician Rajery set out to become its master despite having had his right hand amputated. He has already made outstanding albums under his own name, and here proves to be a match for Ballaké Sissoko, one of Mali's most respected players of the 21-stringed kora. More elaborate than the valiha, it is still a home-made instrument, with nylon fishing line for strings. By contrast, the 11-string oud is made by professional craftsmen from highly polished wood; the least well-known of the three musicians, the Moroccan Driss El Maloumi is clearly another master.

Among the fascinations is playing the string detective, working out which musician is playing which sound. I've guessed who I think is doing what on each track, but am probably wrong half the time.

The heart of the album runs from 'Kouroukanfouga' to 'Toufoula', offering majestic melodies that soon become familiar. 'Rania' sounds remarkably like that US children's

song 'Short'nin' Bread', and 'Toufala' is so authoritative, it feels like it might become the album's equivalent of 'The Train and the River'.

Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2008/jul/13/worldmusic.reviews>