

BASSEKOU KOUYATE

Music of Mali is updated and brought to the world

BY DANIEL DURCHHOLZ

SPECIAL TO THE POST-DISPATCH

Malian musician Bassekou Kouyate comes from a musical lineage that can be traced back for centuries. He grew up in a family of griots — storytellers — that once entertained royalty. His ancestral homeland of Segou gradually lost its political influence, Kouyate says in a recent e-mail interview, “but the traditions remained.”

Kouyate plays the ngoni, a small instrument made of wood, goat skin and nylon strings, though earlier incarnations — the ancestor of the American banjo — were made with a calabash, cow skin and gut strings.

Used to accompany singers of praise songs and traditional stories, the ngoni was largely relegated to the background and played while sitting on the ground. Kouyate revolutionized the instrument by attaching a strap to it and playing standing up.

He did it “because I felt I had as much to contribute as the other instruments,” he says. “I thought it was possible for the ngoni to take its turn playing solos, just like the others.”

Kouyate embraced other

changes as well, using amplification and guitar effects

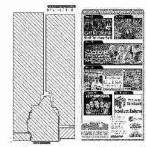
such as the wah-wah pedal.

“If you are brought up, like my family, in the tradition of how to play the ngoni, you have a very solid grounding in Bamana music and you respect it,” Kouyate says of the music of central Mali. “But if you want your instrument to speak to modern audiences, particularly the new generation and those outside West Africa, then you naturally update the style of performance.”

A fortuitous meeting in 1990 with American bluesman Taj Mahal was Kouyate’s first exposure to non-Malian music. He has gone on to play with Toumani Diabate, Ali Farka Toure, Youssou N’Dour, Bjork and, more recently, Bela Fleck.

Kouyate’s latest album, “I Speak Fula” is likely to open new vistas for the instrument and for him as well. It’s being released on the Next Ambiance label, an internationally flavored imprint of Sub Pop, which brought the world Seattle’s grunge sound as well as newer bands such as the Shins and Fleet Foxes.

Kouyate says his goals for the album and his American tour are “to have American audiences get to know the ngoni and realize that traditional instruments can be just as exciting as modern ones, and that Bamana music is a force to be reckoned with. Music is one of the gifts that West Africa brings to the world. People already know the rich Mande tradition, thanks largely to Toumani Diabate, and music from the north, thanks to Ali Farka Toure and Tinariwen. But we have lots of other traditions and styles waiting to be discovered, too.”





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