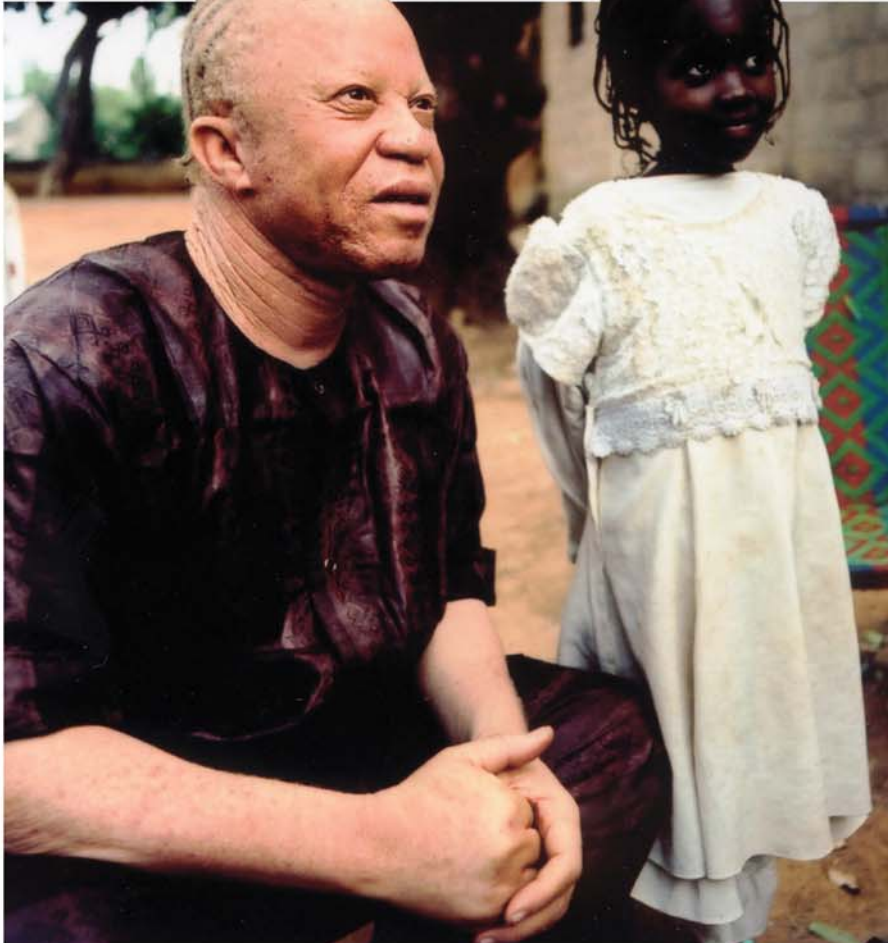


BEGINNER'S GUIDE

Simon Broughton has the low-down on Mali's finest

SALIF KEITA



Listen to 'Sina' from the groundbreaking album *Soro* and you hear one of the most striking sounds from Africa. Salif Keita's voice bursts out in a commanding, incantatory vocal over a deep underpinning blast of synthesizer and strange, desert-like rattles of percussion. It suggests a vast savannah landscape, and Salif's Islamic-inflected voice evokes the spectacular mud-brick mosque of Djenné. A moment later the song speeds away, with punchy trumpet, drums and seductive female backing vocals. When this album appeared in 1987, it was the first time most people in the West had heard music from Mali – and wasn't it good? Bold, uplifting, melodic and not as rhythmically dense as Youssou's sounds in Senegal. Salif was already a star in Mali itself, but he'd moved to Paris and *Soro* marked a new stage in the

sophisticated production of African pop. It was the first big success of Paris-based producer Ibrahima Sylla, and put modern Mande music onto the world stage.

Mali is a vast land-locked country on the southern fringes of the Sahara. While it's currently one of Africa's poorest countries, it was the heart of the Mande Empire founded by Sunjata Keita in the early 13th century and which lasted nearly 300 years. Music in the region traditionally lies in the hands of the *jalis* or *griots* – hereditary musicians and singers who recount the histories of the great warrior-kings like Sunjata. The Sunjata epic is core repertoire for the *jalis* and, while Keita is not an uncommon name in Mali, Salif insists

that he is a direct descendant of Sunjata.

Salif was born in 1949 in Djoliba, a village west of Bamako. He is an albino and was shunned for years by his father; in Mali albinos carried a stigma and were even feared: "When an albino passed by, people used to spit on the ground," remembers Salif. "That hurt. And when my father took me to school the children were afraid of me."

He was interested in music from an early age and started playing the guitar. His father protested strongly as, traditionally, people from noble families are not supposed to be musicians. Telling his father he'd go mad if he couldn't play music, he set off for the capital Bamako and started playing in bars in the late 60s. "I wanted to try another way of being noble," he says. "The truths of the past are not necessarily the truths of today."

Salif's musical career really began in 1970 with the Rail Band who performed at Bamako's Buffet Hotel de la Gare. After independence many West African countries financed state bands, to create a modern African, rather than colonial, sound. The Rail Band, whose paymasters were the railway, were the top band playing modernised, guitar-led Malian music. Salif was the Rail Band's main vocalist for three years until a rivalry developed between him and the Guinean Mory Kanté. Salif defected to join Les Ambassadeurs, a private band led by guitarist Kanté Manfila based at the Bamako Motel. Les Ambassadeurs toured widely in West Africa and it was with them that Salif had his first big hit, 'Mandjou', in 1978, recorded in Abidjan in Ivory Coast as Mali didn't have decent recording facilities at the time. In the early 80s Salif relocated to Paris, where, working alongside French keyboard players Jean-Philippe Rykiel and François Bréant and Senegalese producer Ibrahima Sylla, he created *Soro*. It was one of the biggest-selling African albums ever. On

the back of its success, Salif was invited to perform at Nelson Mandela's 70th birthday concert at Wembley Stadium.

After *Soro*, Salif was signed by Mango, a division of Island Records. On *Ko-Yan* (1988) and *Amen*



ALL PHOTOS BY LUCILLE REYBOZ

(1991) he pursued his fusion of Malian and international styles with contributions on the latter from Carlos Santana, Wayne Shorter and producer Joe Zawinul on keyboards (which should serve as a warning). Alongside these, and the subsequent *Papa* (1999), *Folon: The Past* (1995) was a welcome return to Malian roots with a remake of 'Mandjou' and new classic tracks like 'Tekere' and 'Folon'. But it surely isn't a coincidence that his return to Mali in the last couple of years has resulted in a deeper and maturer sound that is distinctly Malian. His most recent album, *Moffou* (Universal), is possibly his very best with a compelling mixture of vibrant and reflective cuts. Since the beginning there has been a spiritual side to Salif's music. He feels his gift is God-given, his stage persona is dominated by prayer-like gestures and his songs are often in praise of God. Salif has reached a new peak and back in Bamako he has opened his own recording studio and club, also called *Moffou*, where he is keen to develop new Malian artists.

BEST ALBUMS

1 *Soro* (Sterns, 1987)



A classic album that was groundbreaking at the time and still stands up today. The opening 'Wamba' defines the sound of the album, with Brice Wassy's tight drumming, bold brass playing, female backing vocals and Rykiel's 80s keyboard sound. On the title-track the dry keyboard accompaniment surely harks back to the sound of the *balafon* (Malian xylophone). And then, of course, there's the magnificent 'Sina'.

2 *Moffou* (Universal, 2002)



Salif's triumphant return to his roots, transparent in texture and entirely acoustic. 'Yamore', the cool, laid-back hit song, is a duet with Cesaria Evora, then there's the funky 'Madan' with its dry, desert rhythms and Salif's reflective and vulnerable solo songs. Most of the songs are arranged by Kanté Manfila, Salif's old sidekick from Les Ambassadeurs days. A Top of the World in *Songlines* #13.

BEST COMPILATIONS

1 *The Best of Salif Keita – The Golden Voice* (Wrasse, 2001)



This double CD 22-track compilation covers the bases in Salif's international career. Actually all six tracks of *Soro* are here (the whole album is only 38 mins), although you lose the album's satisfying coherence, plus the best from *Folon* and tracks from *Ko-Yan* and *Amen*. Nothing from the film *L'Enfant Lion* is a forerunner of the gentle ballad 'Iniagibe' on the latest album.

2 *The Best of the Early Years* (Wrasse, 2002)



The ideal companion to the above. A selection of Salif's recordings with Les Ambassadeurs and the Rail Band, including the slightly lugubrious 'Soundiata' (Sunjata) and classic 'Mandjou' with Kante Manfila on sparkling guitar.

BEST AVOIDED

Papa (Metro Blue, 1999)



The opening track 'Bolon' should be enough to put you off – relentless funk that never lets up with Grace Jones drifting in from time to time. Co-produced by guitarist Vernon Reid, this is the sound of Salif hitting the bottom before bouncing back for *Moffou*.

LIKE SALIF? THEN TRY...

☆ Sekouba Bambino *Sinikan* (Sono, 2002)

Roughly Salif's contemporary in neighbouring Guinea, Bambino was lead singer in Bembeya Jazz (Guinea's equivalent of the Rail Band) in the mid-70s. Last year he released this magnificent new album produced by the *Soro* team of François Bréant and Ibrahima Sylla. A great voice, great production and a great record – a Top of the World in *Songlines* #15. |



Salif's God-given gift allows him to walk on water