



SÉKOUBA BAMBINO

Nigel Williamson looks at the Guinean singer's extensive career, prior to a rare London appearance in September

When it comes to national musical icons, Senegal has Youssou N'Dour, Mali has Salif Keita and Guinea has Sékouba 'Bambino' Diabaté, with his rich, passionate voice, potent songs and contemporary take on the Mande tradition.

If Bambino – the diminutive name by which he is still known even though he

is in his 50s – is less appreciated outside West Africa than the star names from neighbouring Mali and Senegal, put it down to a patriotic decision to devote himself primarily to his huge fan base in his troubled homeland. Although he has musical links to the African scene in Paris, he remains essentially a homegrown product, the jewel in

the crown of Guinean music who has never signed to a major international label.

Staying loyal to his Guinean roots could not have been easy, for the country's history has been one of dictators and military coups since the nation became the first French colony to gain independence in 1958. Political strife, a shattered economy and a society that has

been slow to open its doors to the outside world have impacted on every facet of life, and many of Guinea's finest musicians such as Mory Kanté relocated to Abidjan or Paris to find success. Yet Bambino has remained, making some of the most dynamic music to be heard anywhere in the African continent, first as the lead singer with Bembeya Jazz and then as a solo performer. "I love my country," he noted in a 2002 interview. "Whatever I sing at home, I want to sing to the whole world. But I'll always remain Bambino of Guinea. Our land has rich cultural treasures, which I want to develop in my own way and take as far as God will allow me."

Born in 1964 in the village of Kintinya, near the town of Siguiré in northern Guinea close to the border with Mali, like so many great West African singers he is descended from a long line of *griots* (known in Guinea as *jelis*). His mother died when he was three, but he was hugely influenced by the songs she had recorded and which he heard all the time on the radio as he was growing up. By the age of eight, he was singing with local bands and after he won the prize for best vocalist at Guinea's National Arts and Culture Festival in 1979, he was instructed at the age of 16 to join the state-sponsored Bembeya Jazz, receiving his orders by telegram from the Guinean president Sékou Touré.

Such high-level interference was not unusual. Three years earlier Touré had imprisoned members of the Guinean national football team for a string of poor results and he kept an even closer watch on Guinean musicians. Culture, he claimed chillingly, was "a better means of domination than the gun" and after coming to power in 1958, he set up an extensive network of state-sponsored local, regional and national dance orchestras, which led to something of a golden age of Guinean music, in paradoxical contrast to the repression and privations of the coercive dictatorship that had created it.

The most popular of the state-employed orchestras was the national Bembeya Jazz orchestra and by the time Bambino was ordered to join them, Bembeya Jazz had been Guinea's top dance band for some 15 years. "Since we already had Sékou le Grand [legendary Bembeya guitarist Sékou 'Diamond Fingers' Diabaté], I became Sékou le Petit, the 'bambino' of the ensemble," he recalls. More than three decades later, the nickname

remains, even though there is nothing diminutive about his strong, soaring voice.

The death of president Touré in 1984 sent Bembeya into decline, as the new military regime dismantled the apparatus of state support. The group was able to tour outside Africa for the first time (something Touré had banned) and Bambino performed with them in Europe and Britain in 1986. "But when we returned we didn't play for two years because there wasn't any equipment," he says. "We didn't work. So I asked the leader of the orchestra, Achken Kaba, if it were possible for me to do an album with my ideas."

The result was his 1989 solo debut *Sama*. His 1992 follow-up, *Le Destin*, was his first to be released in Europe on the German Popular African Music label. After further local cassette releases came the international release in 1996 of *Kassa*, mixing traditional Guinean sounds with the Parisian-based high-tech African funk of producer Ibrahima Sylla. Working further with Sylla, he provided guest vocals on *Gombo Salsa* (1996) by the salsa band Africando. "They were looking for a Mande voice and wanted Kassé Mady Diabaté," he recalls. "They couldn't get hold of him and my name was mentioned. That's how it started." It was to prove a lasting association, and he went on to sing on five further Africando albums.

He also contributed to Sylla's Mandekalou project to "preserve the great griot songs for the benefit of future generations," appearing on two Mandekalou albums, on which he sang memorable duets with the Malian griots Kassé Mady Diabaté and Kandia Kouyaté.


In between came perhaps his finest solo release, 2002's *Sinikan*, which the late Charlie Gillett described as "the best record of its type since Salif Keita's *Soro*, in 1987: West African music with Western pop production values." The album also included a version of James Brown's 'It's a Man's Man's Man's World', a track that Gillett cited as evidence of "the strong connections between the griot vocalists of West Africa and the gospel and soul singers of America's Southern states."


His most recent releases in 2012, *The Griot's Craft* and *Innovation*, found him still in fine voice and sounding as creatively virile as ever. ♦


+ **DATES** Sékouba Bambino will perform at the Inlington Assembly Hall as part of the London African Music Festival on September 28


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BEST ALBUMS

 **Kassa** (Sterns, 1996)
Re-recorded versions of songs from his Guinean cassette releases, plus new material on the first genuinely great album of his solo career. Classic Mande music with a thrillingly modern veneer.

 **Sinikan** (Syllart, 2002)
Soaring melodies, rippling rhythms and passionate vocals on an album that is everything you could want from a marriage of West African griot craft and hi-tech Parisian production – plus a stunningly inventive version of James Brown's 'It's a Man's Man's Man's World'. Reviewed in #15.


 **The Griot's Craft** (Sterns, 2012)
Acoustic guitars and *koras*, chiming melodies, crisp arrangements and seductive singing, as Bambino's voice ranges from the silkily smooth to a full-throated roar on a set of great charm and serenity. Reviewed in #90.

 **Innovation** (Lusafrica, 2012)
As the title suggests, something a little different as Bambino adds a *zouk* dance feel and a Lusophone inspiration to his songs, assisted by the production of Cesaria Evora's keyboardist-arranger Manu Lima. Reviewed in #90.

BEST COLLABORATION

 **Various Artists, Mandekalou: The Art and Soul of the Mande Griots** (Syllart, 2004)
Bambino sings on four of the six tracks in conjunction with the likes of Malian griots Kassé Mady Diabaté and Kandia Kouyaté. You can see all three of them performing a track from the album live on our YouTube channel.

IF YOU LIKE SÉKOUBA BAMBINO, THEN TRY...

 **Mory Kanté Sabote** (World Music Network, 2004)
Guinea's other big name, although he had to leave the country to find success. His 'Yeké Yeké' was a techno classic that defined African dance-pop in the 80s, but this acoustic album finds him in more graceful *griot* territory.