



Amadou & Mariam in a pose reminiscent of many portraits taken by the legendary Malian photographer Malick Sidibé

**Amadou & Mariam's story reads like a movie script: two musicians who fell in love at blind school, overcoming all odds to become international pop stars and ambassadors of a resurgent Mali music scene. But can their new album achieve the same level of success as mega-hit *Dimanche à Bamako*?**

WORDS NIGEL WILLIAMSON  
PORTRAITS YOURI LENQUETTE

# A&M

Perhaps no act reflects the dramatic upturn in the fortunes of Malian music over the past 20 years better than Amadou Bagayoko and Mariam Doumbia. Back in the 1980s, the duo were forced to leave Bamako for Abidjan, Ivory Coast, to begin their recording career because Mali had no music industry. Today, it seems that half the world is beating a path to Mali, desperate to grab a piece of its musical action. Damon Albarn has recorded there; Robert Plant has played there; and Martin Scorsese has filmed there. Amadou & Mariam have become leading lights in this Malian resurgence: one of the best-selling African acts in the world, whose last album, *Dimanche à Bamako*, produced by Manu Chao, propelled them into the charts, sold half a million copies worldwide and turned them into pop stars after a career of 30 years and counting.

In the process, they've gone from appearing at WOMAD to playing Glastonbury, and from tiny clubs to the world's major concert venues. Along the way, they've met and worked with a diverse cast of musicians, several of whom, including Damon »

Albarn and Somalian rapper K'naan, appear on their new album, *Welcome To Mali*.

But – other than an exceptional array of talented performers – what has been responsible for this transformation in the fortunes of Malian music? American producer Joe Boyd, who did more than most to put Malian music on the world map via his groundbreaking 80s recordings with Toumani Diabaté, has one theory. He describes a depressing scene in which only a few years ago, Malian music had “degenerated into cheap synth imitations diluted by Anglo-American rhythms.”

By contrast, great music featuring such traditional instruments as *koras*, *balafons* and *ngonis* is today “blasting from the speaker every time you get in a taxi in Bamako,” he now reports. “Ali Farka Touré, Amadou & Mariam, Salif Keita, Toumani [Diabaté], Oumou Sangaré, Rokia Traoré, The Rail Band, Tinariwen and Bassekou Kouyaté’s group Ngoni ba have put Mali atop the world music hit parade.”

According to Boyd, this is – at least in part – due to the success of records made by Mali’s stars outside the country for world music labels and aimed at Western audiences, who favour more ‘authentic’ styles over cheap synths and Western pop imitations. This, he believes, has had a profound effect in Mali itself. When such recordings – and news of their success on the international market – trickled back to Mali, the country’s musicians were encouraged to begin “experimenting with a kind of post-modern approach to their roots.” A thousand musical flowers have bloomed and Mali today arguably boasts the most vibrant musical scene in Africa, combining tradition and modernity in thrilling fashion.

The music of Amadou & Mariam is a perfect representation of that mix of old and new, and Amadou doesn’t contradict Boyd’s theory. But he offers another significant factor too. “It’s written that the wheel turns and everything changes,” he says softly. “But it’s also linked to the political and economic situation. Once democracy came in the early 90s, that helped a lot to develop our culture. Before we had our first democratic elections in 1992, all the bands – regional and national – were state-run. Suddenly, under democracy people were setting up private bands and there were independent radio stations starting up, and everything changed.”

*Welcome To Mali* was recorded partly in Bamako, but also in Dakar, Paris and London with both Malian musicians and a range of international collaborators, including Albarn, who produced and co-wrote two tracks. Indeed, when *Songlines* catches up with Amadou & Mariam, they are in London for

 You can see archive footage of A&M on this issue’s interactive sampler: [www.songlines.co.uk/interactive/057](http://www.songlines.co.uk/interactive/057)



one of Albarn’s Africa Express concerts [see #56 for the full story behind Africa Express]. The gig had not ended until 3am and when we meet the following day, they are still exhausted from the seven-hour concert.

“It’s a very interesting project because sharing music and ideas and finding new ways to express yourself is the most exciting opportunity you can have as a musician,” Amadou says, while Mariam gently snoozes beside him on their hotel bed. “Damon was in the audience when we played at the Festival in



Clockwise from above: A&M’s blind school band, Institut des Jeunes Aveugles, pictured circa 1975 – Amadou is far left; in Abidjan around 1990; Damon Albarn performing with Mariam at Africa Now at the Barbican on November 23

the Desert in Timbuktu in 2004 with Manu Chao. I think that was where he first got the idea of Africa Express. We’ve done all the Africa Express shows over the last two years – in Britain, Nigeria and Kinshasa [Democratic Republic of Congo] – so we’ve got to know him better and worked closely with him. He has a very good musical feeling so it was a natural thing to ask him to be on the record.”

*Welcome To Mali* is in many ways a key album for Amadou & Mariam. Its predecessor, 2005’s *Dimanche à Bamako*, was one of the best-selling albums to come out of Africa, its success undeniably enhanced by the presence of Manu Chao sprinkling his inimitable magic dust all over the tracks. This time around there is no Chao and an obvious question mark hangs over whether they can repeat the same level of success without him.

“We totally trusted Manu and I think there was a mutual admiration,” Amadou says. “His participation helped a lot and threw a new light on us. *Welcome To Mali* continues what we’ve been doing, but it’s a development too. It’s a record that shows both where we’ve come from and where we want to go.”

**B**orn in Mali in 1954, Amadou has been playing guitar for 40 years and cites his earliest influences as Jimi Hendrix and Cuban music: “I liked modern stuff in the main, but I also listened to the ngoni and that probably affected my guitar playing, too.”

Was the sound of the ngoni responsible for the striking African blues tone in his playing? “That and the blues of Hendrix and John Lee Hooker,” he suggests. “I’m sure there’s a link between the American blues and Malian music. You can hear that most black American music comes from West Africa.”

Working his way up through local and regional bands within the then state-run cultural sector, by 1974 he had moved to Bamako and was playing in Les Ambassadeurs. Aged 20, he was the hip young guitar-slinger in a band of giants. “We played Afro-Cuban music, French music, Mande music – many different kinds of music. We had Kanté Manfila; we had Salif Keita, who sang in the Mande style; we had

“There was a band at the school. Mariam was singing with them and I became the guitarist. That’s how we got together,” Amadou explains. “Apart from the fact that we also fell in love!”

Moussa Doumbia, who was into the James Brown style. Each singer had their own thing. That was a great band.”

He stayed with the Ambassadeurs for four years, attending a blind school in Bamako by day and playing with the band by night. By 1978, the demands were proving too much and he left to attend the school full time.

It was at the blind school that he met Mariam Doumbia. “There was a band at the school. Mariam was singing with them and I became the guitarist. That’s how we got together,” he explains. “Apart from the fact that we also fell in love!”

Amadou’s love songs are a central part of their repertoire and one of them, ‘Je Pense à Toi,’ gave the duo their first French hit in 1998. “I started composing in 1971 and I was always writing love songs,” he says. “But after I met Mariam I started writing them for her, in that spirit.”

At this point, Mariam awakes. “And he’d better carry on writing them,” she says with such perfect timing that you wonder if she’s been asleep at all, or in fact listening to the entire conversation. >>

**Win**

**We have a pair of tickets to Amadou & Mariam’s gig at London’s Koko on February 25. Which West African city did the duo move to in the 80s to further their careers?**

See p5 for *Songlines* competition rules and address. Closing date January 9 2009

Now she has rejoined us, I ask how she became a singer. “I started singing traditional music and listening to all the great Malian divas and trying to copy them when I was very young,” she recalls. “Then I was asked to sing at weddings and family parties. By the time I met Amadou, I was into modern music – James Brown, Eric Clapton, Pink Floyd – but in the band at the school we played traditional music, although it was composed by us.”

On leaving the school in 1983, they began working as a duo. “It was just guitar and our two voices at the beginning and we had success like that,” Amadou recalls. “But there was no music industry in Mali, no studios or producers. We couldn’t record so we had to go to Abidjan to make tapes and to start getting known internationally.”

“At the time it was easier to do that from Ivory Coast than in Mali,” Mariam adds. “Abidjan was like a crossroads, people from all over West Africa were going there to work and record.”

Arriving in Abidjan in 1986, they began recording tapes for the local cassette market and the ubiquitous Ibrahima Sylla offered to distribute them internationally. It was another five years before they returned to Bamako. “We were on tour in Mali in 1991 and we ended up staying. We just never went back,” Mariam says.

Yet there was still no music industry in Mali and so despite the title of the five-CD box set *1990-95: The Malian Years* (released by Because Music in 2005), very little of the music in the package was recorded in Bamako. “We still had to go back to Abidjan to record because there were still no studios in Mali. Everybody in Mali, even Salif Keita, still had to go to Ivory Coast to record,” Amadou explains.

Or Paris. In 1996, Amadou & Mariam were offered a six-month residency in an African restaurant in the French capital. In Paris they

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The ever colour-coordinated Amadou & Mariam, sporting designer specs by Alain Mikli

met Marc-Antoine Moreau, who worked for Polygram (now Universal) and knew their music from a visit to Mali a year earlier.

With their visas about to expire, the couple had to return to Bamako, but Moreau promised to find a way to bring them back. He was as good as his word, and by 1997 had secured them a record deal with Emarcy, Polygram’s jazz division.

He produced their first album himself and has been guiding their career as manager and producer ever since. Yet despite his position at Polygram, he initially had difficulty in persuading the label to release the duo’s debut album, *Sou Ni Tile*.

In frustration he sent the track ‘Je Pense à Toi’ to radio, even though it was not commercially available. The song became an airwaves hit and Moreau was finally able to push the label into releasing the album in 1998.

*Sou Ni Tile* sold almost 100,000 in France alone and was followed by two more albums, *Tje Ni Mouso* (1999) and *Wati* (2002). When the deal with Polygram expired after the third album, Moreau decided to leave the label and go it alone.

Enter Manu Chao. “I knew Manu from

back in the 80s with Mano Negra,” Moreau recalls. “He was talking a lot about Amadou & Mariam in the media saying he’d heard them on the radio and that he loved them. So I said to him, ‘let’s do something together.’”

The result was *Dimanche à Bamako*, co-produced by Chao and Moreau. “We were expecting something big because Manu is so well-known,” Amadou says. “But we were very surprised by how big it was. We suddenly became pop stars when we were 50. But that’s OK. Being famous at 50 is better than being famous too young, and playing at rock festivals has been a dream come true for me because, when I was younger, I loved rock music.”

Did the duo feel under any pressure in trying to follow such a phenomenally successful album? “No,” he says quietly. “When you are making the music you love, there’s no pressure. We just keep going.” ●



**TOP OF THE WORLD ALBUM** TRACK 1 CO-ANNOUNCED BY

**Welcome To Mali** is a TOTW album this issue and is reviewed in the Africa section. You can hear Nigel Williamson's report on A&M on this issue's podcast