

# Salif Keita

Friday, November 1, 8 pm, 2002  
Zellerbach Hall

Salif Keita, lead vocals  
Souleymane Doumbia, bolon  
Diely Moussa Kouyaté, guitar  
Mamady Kamissoko, guitar  
Adama Kouyaté, tamani  
Drissa Bagayoko, djembe  
Harouna Samaké, kamalé n'goni  
Sayon Sissoko, kamalé n'goni  
Mamadou Koné, calebasse  
Aminata Doumbia, backup vocals  
Assitan Diarra, backup vocals  
Sécouba Sissoko, backup vocals

Philippe Simonin, house sound engineer  
Freddy Zerbib, monitor sound engineer and tour manager

Tonight's program will be announced from the stage.  
There will be one intermission.

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Salif Keita is widely regarded as “the golden voice of Mali,” and is one of the pre-eminent stars of world music who has successfully fused African musical tradition with contemporary Western styles.

Since the dawn of time, to protect their crops and fruit from birds, the peasants of the Sahel have played the moffou, a hand-made instrument for humble people, available to everyone, and made according to techniques that go back to the origins of humanity. This small flute produces a shrill, nasal sound that winged creatures particularly detest.

Moffou is also the title of Keita's latest album, and the name of the club that the singer has just opened in Bamako to promote the West African music scene. In both cases, the choice of the name was deliberate, and it expresses a genuine desire to return to roots—to the “dark continent” and Mali, the land of the Bambara, Malinké, and Soninké peoples, with their separate cultures and ways of life, their rituals, and traditions. Moffou is an entirely acoustic CD, a work that is completely African in inspiration. Here, with soul and pop influences temporarily shelved, Keita delivers one of his freshest and most authentic recordings.

This could well be a peak in a career that began 34 years ago in 1968, when Salif left the banks of the river Nger, the fields, and his family home, to try his luck in Bamako, the capital of Mali. More than a new start, it was an escape, a clean break—the reason being that Keita's childhood and adolescence (he was born on August 25, 1949, in the village of Djoliba) was anything but a pleasure.

Call it destiny's whim, a nasty stroke of fate, but Keita was born an albino. Being black with a white skin comes as a curse in this part of the world: native beliefs—not to say superstitions—attribute evil powers to albinos, and their physical difference brings with it ridicule, abuse, and blacklisting. The rays of the sun, which burn with great heat in the region, are torture to albinos, considerably worsening their sight. So the baby was hidden, disowned, and isolated. It was years before Keita's own father even considered speaking to him. Salif grew up a loner, taking delight in books and study, and he developed a passion for the songs of the griots, the wandering poets who

traveled between townships telling royal sagas, relaying family odysseys, and handing down the oral tradition from generation to generation. It was here, in the countryside, that Salif shaped his voice into something as astonishing as it is gripping, unique, and immediately identifiable.

But the problem remained: the Keitas, proud farmers for generations, were a noble family, direct descendants of the valorous Sounjata, a small, paralyzed prince who showed formidable prowess in federating a great number of clans who were enemies and who, at the turn of the 13th century, formed the powerful Mali empire.

And an aristocrat doesn't sing! It was a subject on which the young Salif's family was totally inflexible: music was exclusively for the griots. To choose their path meant transgressing ancestral rules, and automatically becoming a community outcast. The only solution was to leave.

In Bamako at the end of the 1960s, the voice of Salif Keita gradually seduced the musicians of the capital, beginning with saxophonist Tidiane Koné, the leader of the Rail Band of Bamako, which was then delighting evening audiences at the Hôtel de la Gare (each of the capital's hotels had its own orchestra). Impressed by Keita's vocal potential, Koné hired the young man; Keita soon became the true star of the orchestra, and rapidly took it to fame.

In 1973, when a then-unknown singer from Guinea—Mory Kanté—succeeded him, Salif joined Les Ambassadeurs, a dance band led by singer-guitarist Kanté Manfila. Resident in the Bamako Hotel, an establishment with a clientele composed mainly of Westerners, the band proposed a broader, but eclectic repertoire, which bit seriously into Anglo-Saxon pop, French songs, and Afro-Cuban rhythms. It toured throughout West Africa before emigrating to the Ivory Coast and its capital, Abidjan, where the technical and commercial structures were better developed than in Bamako. There, in 1978, Salif recorded Mandjou, an enormous commercial success. It was then that Salif's international career took off: the Keita trademark sound and style were already in place, featuring organ, keyboards, guitars, and saxophones mingled with traditional strings and percussion, snatches of jazz, rock, funk, and afro-beat to reshape the contours of ancestral rhythms and chants.

In December of 1980, Salif and Kanté crossed the Atlantic and spent three months in New York, long enough to record the *Primpin* and *Toukan* albums, which aroused the same enthusiasm as *Mandjou*. But Keita already had his mind set on other places: he dreamed of Paris. In France, the Afro music movement was in full bloom, led by such personalities as Pierre Akendengué, Manu Dibango, and Ray Lema.

In 1984, Keita triumphed at the Angoulême Festival of "crossbreed music": he was so overwhelmed by the French public's reaction that he decided to leave Abidjan and settle in France. Keita soon slipped into the Mali population living in the Paris suburbs of Montreuil. A year later, he accepted Manu Dibango's invitation to take part in the recording of "Tam Tam for Africa," and the song's royalties were donated entirely to Ethiopia, where famine had never been so severe.

In 1987, Keita returned to the studios for the first time in six years to record *Soro*, named for a kind of Mandingo blues sung in Malinké (the majority language of the Mandé people). The record was a true masterpiece and an enormous hit. That October, invited to England for a concert to celebrate Nelson Mandela's 70th birthday, Keita found himself surrounded by established stars—including Youssou N'Dour and Ray Lema—and was accepted into the small circle of "world music" masters.

Many tours followed, taking Keita to every continent. They were accompanied by such albums as *Ko-Yan* (1988) and *Amen* (1991), under the artistic direction of Joe Zawinul. Keita also gave several concerts with the *Syndicate* led by the same Joe Zawinul, all of the musicians fusion heroes admired by Salif since the first *Weather Report* albums at the beginning of the 1970s. And then came *Folon* (1995), produced by Wally Badarou from Benin (an associate of Grace Jones, Peter Tosh, and Joe Cocker).

From 1997 onwards, Salif Keita returned more and more frequently to Mali. He kept a pied-à-terre in Montreuil, where his children lived, and opened a studio in Bamako. He devoted himself increasingly to the SOS Albino organization, which he founded in 1990 to give counsel, direction, and support to his unfortunate brothers and sisters.

Today, Salif Keita is pan-African in his soul, a convinced anti-racist and militant pacifist showing the greatest respect for Nelson Mandela. An artist of great generosity who has always tried to build new bridges between Africa and the rest of the world, he now strives to take a greater part in the destiny of his country, to encourage emigrants to return, and to protect and promote local artists by working towards the emancipation of African music so that it will no longer be promoted mainly in Europe and America, but also in its land of origin.

At a time when the "dark continent" seems assailed by the vilest of ills (including tribal, ethnic, and border wars; the shameless exploitation of natural resources by multinational corporations; corrupt politics; pollution; excessive debt; illiteracy and famine; devastating disease and the

frightening progress of AIDS; the massacre of protected wildlife; and the destruction of the forests), Salif Keita obstinately refuses to join the fatalists. "Happiness is not for tomorrow," he proclaims. "It is not hypothetical—it starts here and now. Down with violence, egoism, and despair. Stop pessimism! Let's pick ourselves up. Nature has given us extraordinary things. It's not over yet—nothing's decided. Let's take advantage of the wonders of this continent at last. Intelligently, in our own way, at our own rhythm, like responsible men proud of their inheritance. Let's build the country of our children. And stop taking pity on ourselves. Africa is also the joy of living, optimism, beauty, elegance, grace, poetry, softness, the sun, and nature. Let's be happy to be its sons, and fight to build our happiness."

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