

Habib Koité & Bamada

Sunday, January 26, 2003, 7 pm
Zellerbach Hall

featuring

Habib Koité, lead vocals and guitar
Souleymane Ann, drums and backup vocals
Abdoul Wahab Berthe, bass, kamala n'goni, and backup vocals
Kélétigui Diabaté, balaphon and violin
Mahammadou Kone, percussion
Boubacar Sidibe, guitar, harmonica, and backup vocals

Tonight's program will be announced from the stage.

Cal Performances' presentation of Habib Koité & Bamada is sponsored by Hear Music.

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and the California Arts Council, a state agency.

In the past five years, Habib Koité has gone from being one of Africa's best-kept secrets to becoming an international star and one of the leading figures in contemporary world music. His arrangements reflect centuries of Malian griot tradition, while at the same time incorporating subtle Western influences to create songs that appeal to people from all walks of life. A singer, composer, and guitarist, Koité—with his group Bamada—has released several critically acclaimed and successful albums. Described as “the biggest pop star of the West African nation of Mali” by Rolling Stone, Habib Koité has earned the adoration of fans worldwide.

Born in 1958, Koité comes from a noble line of Khassonké griots. He developed his unique guitar style accompanying his griot mother, and he inherited his passion for music from his paternal grandfather, who played the djelly n'goni, a traditional instrument associated with hunters from the Wassolou region of Mali. “Nobody really taught me to sing or to play the guitar,” explains Habib, “I watched my parents, and it washed off on me.”

Habib was headed for a career as an engineer, but on the insistence of his uncle, who recognized Habib's musical talent, he enrolled at the National Institute of Arts (INA) in Bamako, Mali. In 1978, after only six months, he was made conductor of INA Star, the school's prestigious band. Habib studied music for four years, graduating at the top of his class in 1982. (In fact, his talent was so impressive, that upon graduation, the INA hired him as a guitar teacher.) During his studies, Habib had the opportunity to perform and play with a series of popular Malian artists, including Kélétigui Diabaté and Toumani Diabaté. He sang and played on Toumani Diabaté's 1991 release *Shake the World* (SONY), and Kélétigui Diabaté is now a full-time member of Habib's band.

In 1988, Habib formed his own group, Bamada (a nickname for residents of Bamako which roughly translates “in the mouth of the crocodile”), with young Malian musicians who had been friends since childhood. In 1991, he won first prize at the Voxpole Festival in Perpignan, France, which earned him enough money to finance the production of two songs. One of those tracks, “Cigarette A Bana” (“The Cigarette is Finished”), was a hit throughout West Africa. After the release of another successful single, “Nanalé” (“The Swallow”), Habib received the prestigious Radio France International (RFI) Discoveries Prize. This award made it possible for the group to undertake its first tour outside of Africa during the summer of 1994.

In 1994, Habib met his current manager, Belgian Michel De Bock. Working together, they recorded his first album, *Muso Ko*. From that point forward, Habib became a fixture on the European festival circuit and began to spread his infectious music and high-energy performances around the world. Habib has played at most of Europe's major venues and festivals, including the Montreaux Jazz Festival, WOMAD, and the World Roots Festival. In the spring of 2000, he toured Europe and Turkey as an invited guest with the legendary avant-garde jazz group, the Art Ensemble of Chicago. Habib's second album, *Ma Ya*, was released in Europe in 1998 to widespread acclaim. It spent an unprecedented three months at the top of the world music charts in Europe. A subtle production that revealed a more acoustic, introspective side of Habib's music, *Ma Ya* was released in North America by Putumayo World Music in early 1999 and quickly helped establish Habib as one of world music's most exciting new artists.

In February 1999, in support of the US debut of *Ma Ya*, Habib Koité and blues artist Eric Bibb were the featured artists on Putumayo's Mali to Memphis theme tour, educating audiences across the country about the connections between the Blues and Malian music. Habib returned with his band later that year, lighting up festival stages and concert halls around the country. The critical and commercial response to *Ma Ya* was tremendous. Habib was featured in hundreds of newspapers and magazines, including *People* magazine, *Rolling Stone*, *Le Monde*, *Songlines*, *De Standaard*, *Le Soir*, and *Rhythm Magazine*, to name a few. He has also been featured in the US on National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*, WXPB's *World Café*, PRI's *The World*, and the House of Blues Radio Hour "Mali to Memphis" special, as well as on prestigious international programs such as CNN's *WorldBeat*. *Ma Ya* reached #1 and spent 20 weeks in the Top 20 of the CMJ new world music chart. The album also broke new ground at AAA rock radio, spending several months in regular rotation on commercial stations across the country. *Ma Ya* has sold over 40,000 copies in North America and nearly 100,000 worldwide, which is a tremendous success for a new world music artist.

Habib's artistry and powerful personality have earned him the respect of fellow artists such as Jackson Browne and Bonnie Raitt, both of whom ended up visiting Habib in Mali. They have both done a great deal to support Habib's music by promoting private events designed to attract new audiences and even performing live with Habib on stage.

In the fall of 2000, Habib participated in the "Voices of Mali" tour with Oumou Sangare, one of West Africa's most popular artists. The tour was a phenomenal success, selling out large-capacity concert halls around the US and Canada. While Sangare was the more recognized name, Habib quickly won over the audiences, creating new fans and proving that he is an artist of tremendous crossover potential. During the West Coast leg of the tour, Habib was joined on stage by Bonnie Raitt, who jammed with him in front of ecstatic crowds in the Bay Area, Santa Barbara, and Los Angeles.

Habib's new album, *Baro*, continues where *Ma Ya* left off, with a set of haunting melodies and virtuoso guitar playing. Habib is backed by Kélétiogui Diabaté, Mali's undisputed king of the balafon (a West African wooden-keyed xylophone), who recorded with Lionel Hampton in the 1960s. With the support of the rest of the talented members of Bamada, Koité swings from the Cuban-influenced grooves of "Batoumanbe" to the ethereal and entrancing "Sinama Denw." *Baro* even includes a new, Latin-style version of Koité's first hit, "Cigarette A Bana," the track that made him a star in West Africa.

Habib takes some unique approaches to playing the guitar. He tunes his instrument to the pentatonic scale and plays on open strings as one would on a kamale n'goni. At other times, Habib plays music that sounds closer to the Blues or flamenco, two styles he studied under Khalilou Traoré, a veteran of the legendary Afro-Cuban band *Maravillas du Mali*. Unlike the griots, his singing style is restrained and intimate, with varying cadenced rhythms and melodies.

Mali has rich and diverse musical traditions, which have many regional variations and styles that are particular to the local cultures. Habib is unique because he brings together different styles, creating a new pan-Malian approach that reflects his open-minded interest in all types of music. The predominant style played by Habib is based on the *danssa*, a popular rhythm from his native city of Keyes. He calls his version *danssa doso*, a Bambara term he coined that combines the name of the popular rhythm with the word for hunters' music (*doso*), one of Mali's most powerful and ancient

musical traditions. “I put these two words together to symbolize the music of all ethnic groups in Mali. I’m curious about all the music in the world, but I make music from Mali. In my country, we have so many beautiful rhythms and melodies. Many villages and communities have their own kind of music. Usually, Malian musicians play only their own ethnic music, but me, I go everywhere. My job is to take all these traditions and to make something with them, to use them in my music.” With one foot in the past and the other in the future, Habib Koité is an artist for a generation that has witnessed the breaking down of cultural barriers. While he respects and treasures the music of his ancestors, Habib also envisions a day when village chiefs will communicate with the world from their grass-thatched hut via computers. Habib’s music proves that we do not have to forsake the past in order to develop, and that the modern world, for all of its benefits, needs to keep its links to the folklore, mythology, and history of the people in order for it to retain its soul.

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