



Exotic

MOVES MAINSTREAM

WEST AFRICA'S BLUESY, TRANCELIKE MUSIC ENCHANTS THE WEST.

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STAFF WRITER

West Africa may be one of the poorest regions in the world but it boasts a natural resource of astonishing wealth: its music. In recent years, the aural riches of Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Gambia have been gaining currency in America and Europe through several ambassadors.

Take Niger's Etran Finatawa, for example. When the six-person band came to the United States in April, they weren't sure what sort of reception to expect given their exoticism. Half the band are Tuaregs who resemble Saharan astronauts in bright blue turbans; the others are Wodaabe tribesmen whose traditional dress consists of face paint, patterned tunic, and towering head-dress feather. But when audiences heard the syncopated clapping, hand drums, and tribal chants that swirl around the centrifugal force of the guitarist's bluesy melodies, the response was ecstatic. Rave concert and album reviews followed in *The New York Times* and *Rolling Stone* magazine.

"I was really very surprised," says Sandra van Edig, the band's manager, in a phone interview from Africa. "The audience in those cities we played was very enthusiastic. More enthusiastic than the European audi-

ence, actually.”

Though African music has penetrated Western consciousness in the past – most notably when Nigerian singer Fela Kuti broke through in the 1970s and, later, when Paul Simon introduced the world to Ladysmith Black Mambazo on the 1986 “Graceland” album – it is “back in vogue,” according to Q magazine. The difference now is that the music is receiving sustained attention. Chalk that up to globalization. In an information age where niche genres can find a sustainable following, West African music in particular – with its accessible sounds ranging from trancey pop to unvarnished blues – is acquiring fans beyond the region’s savannah and sand-dune belts.

“Of all the areas in Africa now, it’s West Africa which has found the most successful fusion between contemporary and traditional styles,” says Simon Broughton, editor of *Songlines*, a magazine about world music. “It does sound very different from Anglo-American pop music because there’s a bounce and a swing to it, and fantastic instrumental play. And this warm, sunny side to it. Most people are not intimidated by it because it’s not ethnic music – it’s popular music which is very popular in West Africa and caters to a large, popular audience.”

The region’s high profile is evident on the tour circuit. American stages have welcomed the likes of songwriter Habib Koité and fellow Malians Salif Keita – known as “the golden voice of Africa” – and Vieux Farka Touré, whose father, Ali, was Africa’s most famous guitarist. It’s significant, too, that Amadou & Mariam, a blind Malian couple whose joyous pop has been feted by publications such as *Entertainment Weekly*, are playing Chicago’s Lollapalooza festival. Another sign that “desert guitar” groups such as Etran Finatawa, Tinariwen, and

Toumast are überhip: Online-music magazine Pitchfork recently posted a primer to “Rebel Blues in Africa.”

There’s a limit to such popularity, of course. It’s fanciful to imagine Ryan Seacrest playing Orchestra Baobab on his radio show just because the Senegalese band garnered a glowing write up in *Rolling Stone*.

But the iPod generation is so attuned to diverse genres that many listeners are discovering world-music artists through other avenues. The soundtracks of films set in Africa, such as “The Constant Gardener” and “Blood Diamond,” have played a role. New-media outlets ranging from MySpace

to Afropop.org offer sound clips for curious explorers. On iTunes, numerous regional offerings include Oumou Sangare, Mali’s top female singer. And, increasingly, the sounds of instruments such as the kora, djembe, calabash, and njurka violin aren’t just confined to National Public Radio. Nowadays, Koité and Benin’s Angélique Kidjo can be heard on adult alternative radio stations.

“What we’ve seen in the US, because we’re less exposed to African music and world music [than Europe], is a growing awareness of music from other countries,” says Jacob Edgar, an ethnomusicologist who founded Cumbancha, the record label that is home to artists such as Koité. “The more we learn, the more people are open to it. A lot of radio stations that never used to play African music and world music are starting to play it.”

But why are Westerners particularly taken with West Africa? After all, its sounds are far from homogenous – even within one country. One reason: Much of the music feels more organic than the dated sound of keyboards, big brass sections, and glossy production of Southern African pop. Moreover, the DNA of rock music owes much to the African region shaped like an elephant’s ear.

“If you look for the roots of rock ‘n’ roll, you find them in the blues. And if you look for the roots of the blues, you’ll find it in West Africa,” says Justin Adams, a guitarist in Robert Plant’s band who has just recorded his own album, “Soul Science,” with Gambia’s Juldeh Camara. “You can draw such a nice line from groups that people really love from their teenage years – The Rolling Stones, or whatever – to Tinariwen, who have electric guitars that really buzz.”

The wider familiarity of African sounds can also be attributed to a more unexpected influence: Western rock stars. Artists such as Vampire Weekend, Brett Dennen, and Coldplay have replicated rootsy African guitar lines on their records. Other artists have gone one step further. Björk invited kora master Toumani Diabate to play on 2007’s “Volta.” Tinariwen has jammed on stage with Carlos Santana. Hip-hop star Akon joined Amadou & Mariam for a remix of their song “Coulibaly.”

These gateway artists provide an opportunity for people to discover music they might not otherwise be exposed to, as Koité discov-

ered after he was a guest performer on Bonnie Raitt’s 2002 album, “Silver Lining.”

“We spent two or three weeks together trav-

eling in Mali. We became really good friends and I call her my grand sister,” says Koité, in a call from Europe. “When I played [in the US], she came with her guitar and played one song with me. It had a positive impact for my career in the US because a lot of journalists talk about those events.”

Endorsements by such luminaries are important, but less of a factor in determining the success of world music than they once were, says David Hepworth, a British music journalist who helped found magazines such as Q, Mojo, and The Word. Now, he says, there’s a vibrant, self-sufficient world-music community that encompasses festival circuits and even specialist magazines – indicators that the interest isn’t just a fad.

Mr. Hepworth has his own theory as to why the region’s music resonates abroad: Much of it is gentle and trancelike. For instance, when Diabaté plays the kora – a 21-stringed instrument shaped like an inverted lollipop – his 10 fingers somehow create simultaneous bass lines, counterpoint melodies, and rippling filigrees that are a balm to the senses. “It’s a sound you couldn’t hear in Western popular music,” says Hepworth, “and I suppose the ear just craves it after a time.”

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COURTESY OF GAVIN MATHIESON/WORLD VILLAGE

‘SOUL SCIENCE’: Justin Adams (rear), Salah Dawson Miller (on left), and Gambian Juldeh Camara (front) collaborated on a new album, while Niger’s Etran Finatawa (top) just released ‘Desert Crossroads.’



COURTESY OF DIRK LEUNIS/CUMBANCHA

MUSICAL BALM: His gentle, trancelike rhythms have made Malian songwriter Habib Koité a hit overseas.