

CHARLESTON

CITY PAPER

VOL 13 ISSUE 43 • JUNE 9, 2010 • charlestoncitypaper.com



The pentatonic Bambara music played by Kouyate and his seven-piece band is a form thoroughly familiar to people from his native Mali, specifically the Segou region Kouyate calls home, and yet also similar to the blues sound we all know and love here in the United States. That strange mix of familiarity and foreignness lends a particularly entrancing feel to the sound. They've collaborated with artists like American blues musician Taj Mahal and banjo virtuoso Bela Fleck.

"Playing with Bela is both stimulating and challenging for me because he is such an admirable musician," Kouyate notes. "He has encouraged me to play music in his style as well as introducing the banjo to its roots in Bamanan music."

"We had a really interesting visit recently from Juan-Mario Cuellar, the Spanish-Colombian classical guitar player, and it was fascinating to play 19th-century Spanish music classics with him," he adds. "I would say that, although it has not changed the music I play, which remains the product of my Bamanan background, it has given me ideas about how to present this music."

High on the list of these innovative approaches to presenting the music is, of course, using the internet to provide access to it on a wider scale than previously possible.

BASSEKOU KOUYATE & NNGONI BA

Griot Blues

Bassekou Kouyate brings West African blues to the Holy City

Bassekou Kouyate is a musician, and an astonishingly good one at that, but he is first and foremost a griot. And music is just one aspect of what a griot does: The title, in his West African home country of Mali, describes a man who is poet and pundit, singer and storyteller, a walking library of the past and an ever-witty commentator on the here and now.

"Griots had access to leaders of society, knew about the reasons behind political decisions and actions, but were also the recognized communicators and knew how to tell the community about the history behind public events," notes Kouyate in an e-mail correspondence (translated by his Malian manager, Violet Diallo). "It involves much more than storytelling. It includes keeping oral history at a time"

when there was no form of written recording, and where even when the written word became available, few people had access to this tradition."

The music is just the medium through which the story is told (as most of us have learned through our own experience, the stories told in song lyrics tend to stick). If the words have a nice rhythm and a person can visualize what is going on as the song is sung, even better.

"This kind of story is easy for people to grasp and remember, and fixes events in their minds," he explains.

Kouyate is a master of the ngoni, the traditional instrument on which his native Bambara music is played, and this has made both him and his band, Nngoni Ba, highly sought-out musicians on the world stage.

just as it has been in the U.S., technology is playing a significant role in how the young musicians and music lovers of Kouyate's West Africa discover new singers and songs and share that music with others. Kouyate himself has seen students gathering in cafes, surfing the web, and playing songs by their favorite artists, even adding Nngoni Ba ring-tones to their cell phones.

"People now have much easier access to music from other areas; you are unlikely to find many Malians now who have never heard jazz, rock 'n' roll, country and western, and other American types of music," he notes.

"But it also means that they know even more about their own music and can judge the worth of Malian performers for themselves, even those from other areas of the country.

"Another interesting thing is that young people are both able to make music themselves, inspired by other, professional musicians, and they also get to hear and value traditional instruments such as the ngoni instead of just guitars and drums. Many are inspired to pick up the ngoni, the kamalen ngoni, the kora, etc., and begin to play these instruments that were being completely overshadowed by imported modern instruments."

"For Kouyate, the ability to be a universal language for reaching out to people and sharing feelings and emotions is the best aspect of music. Regardless of national origins, native languages, and dialects, music is something we all have in common. Even when a particular style or instrument is unfamiliar, there is still something warmly recognizable in it that allows us to share what the musician is expressing. —Jason A. Zwicker

Spoleto Festival USA. Bassekou Kouyate & Nngoni Ba. \$25-\$40. June 9, 9 p.m. The Cistern, 66 George St. (843) 579-3100