



Boubacar Traoré

Daniel Brown reflects on the humble yet impressive career of the Malian singer and guitarist who feels just as at home on his farm as on the stage

He has been called Mali's Muddy Waters, an African Robert Johnson, or simply Africa's greatest singer. Accolades Boubacar Traoré would be the first to flee, such is his abnegation, modesty and detestation of all that smells of stardom. His long-time friend and producer Christian Mousset says he has to drag the 72-year-old away from his farm and seven acres of field on the hilly outskirts of Bamako to record or go on tour. "That's where his true passion is, building up his agricultural business, sowing, growing enough crops to feed his enlarged family," Mousset chuckles after a February concert promoting Boubacar's tenth and latest album, *Mbalimaou*. It's an icy-cold Parisian night, but Mousset, the French veteran of world music, is glowing. "He's one-of-a-kind, full of contradictions, a sort of noble farmer, who jealously guards his private life,

travels with his talismanic *gri-gri*, goes to the mosque, drinks a beer, grabs his guitar and plays you riveting blues, always in a minor key, an original style that has bluesmen like Corey Harris running in the other direction." But not the countless fans the singer-guitarist has amassed since the 60s.

Born in 1942 in the western Malian town of Kayes, 400km from Bamako near the Senegalese border, Boubacar taught himself in secret on his older brother's guitar, plucking at it with two fingers in the tradition of the West African *kora*. His other passion, football, so obsessed him he left school at 12 and devoted himself to *kari kari*, or dribbling, hence his nickname 'Kar Kar'. At 21, he left his family farm to seek fortune in the capital. After a couple years of playing at the mythical Buffet de la Gare de Bamako with the Pionniers Jazz band, the national radio recorded eight of his



Laurence Philippon/Anthenes du Mali

songs, including 'Mali Twist', which was an instant hit, becoming part of the country's soundtrack as it celebrated its newfound independence. Two more smash successes, 'Kar Kar Madison' and 'Kayeba' solidified his status as one of Mali's most popular singers in a style Mousset describes as "akin to rock'n'roll blues." Despite his notoriety, however, Boubacar was forced to eke out a living as a tailor.

The military overthrow of Modibo Keita's socialist government in 1968 signalled Boubacar's sudden disappearance from the



Boubacar in his Pionniers Jazz heyday



radio airwaves and the public eye. He returned to Kayes, penniless and once again picked up the family field hoe. Nineteen years went by, and his fans were convinced Kar Kar had died as Boubacar made a meagre living.

In 1987, a chance meeting with journalists from Bamako allowed the 45-year-old to return to the public eye and record a 1989 cassette *Mariama*. "But then things got complicated," Boubacar explains. "Somehow people thought *Mariama* was a posthumous album, it didn't do so well. And my personal life, well, I was having trouble." Indeed, his wife Pierrette died and a broken-hearted Boubacar left for France where he worked as a mason and, at the weekends, performed for fellow workers.

It was at this time that a Dutch producer from the Sterns Africa label, Robert Urbanus, stumbled on the *Mariama* cassette and somehow tracked Boubacar down to the migrant hostel he lived in. "We met in 1990 at the Belleville métro and I was wearing a flat cap. He signed me up for an English tour and I've been wearing this kind of cap ever since. It's my lucky charm," he says and breaks out into a laugh. Another lucky charm he still wears is the silver ring his mother gave him aged eight.

The rest, as the saying goes, is history. His resurrection in Mali was heralded by his *Kar Kar* and *Les Enfants de Pierrette* albums (1992 and 1995 respectively) while his international reputation was founded on three more albums before 2000 and on regular world tours. His complicity with Christian Mousset was sealed with a total of seven recordings and regular appearances at Mousset's Musiques Métisses festival in Angoulême. "He touches me musically and as a human being," Mousset

says. "There's an incredible purity about him, he is both faithful to his own unique music style and to the friends he made decades ago." The ten-year-old collaboration with harmonica player Vincent Bucher has consolidated a crossover style that rarely wavers from a stripped-down, acoustic, slightly experimental and always visceral approach to Malian blues. ♦

+ **DATES** Boubacar Traoré plays in London and Norwich in May, see the *Gig Guide* for details



BEST ALBUMS

Mariama (Sterns, 1990)
Originally released as a cassette in Mali in 1989, Boubacar's first international release helped relaunch his career. *Mariama* is a raw, spellbinding testimony to the singer's nostalgic style. Reviewed in #19.

Sa Golo (Label Bleu/Indigo, 1996)
This radiant album sees Boubacar paying homage to historic African rulers and the continent's cultural diversity, as well as requited or unrequited love. The singer pursues his calm inner journey with subtlety. *Sa Golo* translates as 'Snake Skin,' as Kar Kar sheds dense layers of Niger blues with his inimitable melancholy.

Kongo Magni (Lusafrica, 2005)
Accompanied by a closely-knit combo (including the wonderful harmonica player Vincent Bucher), Boubacar breaks from his achingly bleak outlook to celebrate the birth of his granddaughter and shares a new-found inner peace. Reviewed in #30.

Mali Denhou (Lusafrica, 2010)
Backed by his faithful posse on calabash, *ngoni*, *balafon* and harmonica, this is another thoughtful album combining takes in live conditions and refined studio production. It mixes improvised blues licks with Boubacar's native *kassonké* rhythms. Reviewed in #74.

Mbalimaou (Lusafrica, 2015)
Belying his age, Boubacar releases one of his finest albums in years. *Mbalimaou*, which translates as 'My Brothers', mixes Boubacar's blues with jazzy instrumentation and spacious guitar plucking. A subtle and contemplative release. Reviewed in #106.

IF YOU LIKE BOUBACAR TRAORÉ, THEN TRY:

Robert Johnson
The Complete Recordings (Columbia, 1990)
A timely reminder of the proximity of West African and North American blues. Johnson's pining voice and eclectic guitar-playing have an eternal quality that shines almost 80 years later.