

Youri Lenquette



Oumou Sangaré

Nigel Williamson speaks to the Malian singer about her career, which has been dedicated to offering African women a voice and correcting gender inequalities

The moment that shaped Oumou Sangaré's career occurred when she was just two years old. With her mother pregnant and struggling to bring up a brood of small children, Oumou's father took a second wife, abandoned his family in Bamako and emigrated to the Ivory Coast. His desertion sank her mother, who made her living singing at weddings and baptisms,

into a deep depression. But it also made her "a fighter," a quality Oumou inherited along with her mother's singing talent. At five years old she was singing with her and by the age of 13, she had become the family's main breadwinner. "That's what has given me strength in my life," she says. "It was a very hard childhood and it gave me an incredible character. I can face up to any obstacle."

The experience also informed her music and throughout her career she has used her songs as campaigning tools to improve the position of women in Mali and to oppose polygamy, child marriage and a system that defines a 'good wife' as a submissive woman. "Ever since I was a kid, I promised myself that one day when I have the kilos – when I can toss my weight around – I will scream about this problem to the whole world," she said.

It was no coincidence then that her first album was titled *Moussolou* (which means 'Women'); or that her next album included a song titled 'Dugu Kamalemba' (which translates as 'The Skirt-chaser'); or that the title of her third album, *Worotan* (meaning 'Ten Kola Nuts'), was a reference to the price of a bride in an arranged marriage.

She also wrote 'Magnoumako' (Agony) about her mother's suffering, "how she wept, how she was marginalised, how she was ignored, how she struggled." The song appeared on the 2003 two-disc anthology, *Oumou*. 'How can an African woman hear that song without crying?' she asks in the album's sleeve notes.

"Women have a hard time in Africa. We have no voice; our men do all our talking for us," she says. "My role is to speak directly to women both through my songs and setting an example and showing them that they can make their own decisions. I was the first one who started to speak out about correcting the inequalities and injustice that women still endure in Mali."

Six foot tall, stylishly elegant, feisty and charismatic with a soulful, soaring voice, Oumou makes a striking role model. Born in 1969, her parents came from Wassoulou, a remote wooded region in southern Mali, which also straddles the borders of the Ivory Coast and Guinea. The area also boasts a rich and distinctive culture based around the special place in village life afforded to the traditional caste of hunters, whose music, played on the six-string *donso ngoni* harp, is believed to have magic powers.

Its hypnotic dance rhythms play a large part in Oumou's music, although her recordings use the instrument's higher-pitched non-ritual version, the *kamelengoni*, as she sings in the Wassoulou style known as *koni* (songbird), quite different from the *griot* tradition.

After joining the Djoliba Percussion band with whom she toured Europe in 1986 – and which also included in its line-up a young Toumani Diabaté – she recorded her debut album in the Ivory Coast at the age of 20. On its release in 1990, *Moussolou* was a sensation in Mali, selling more than 100,000 copies on cassette – and proving highly controversial, both for her espousal of women's rights and the song 'Diaraby Nene' (The Shivers of Love), which shocked a highly-conservative society with its erotic expression of female sensuality.

"People couldn't believe my music. They would say 'what she sings about is heavy... she's denouncing polygamy, she's encouraging women to stand up to their husbands, she's got guts'," Oumou told musicologist Lucy Durán. "It was a kind of music revolution. Every household in Bamako had a copy of that record and my mother was so happy she cried."

The album was released outside Europe a year later on World Circuit, after the label's

owner Nick Gold heard the record during a trip to Bamako. "You couldn't escape that music and you didn't want to," he elaborates. "It was everywhere. As soon as you left a café where they were playing it, the baton was taken up by a passing car and then the next market stall. I spent a week in Bamako hearing Oumou wherever I went."

It was the beginning of a long association with World Circuit for whom she went on to record three further albums between 1993 and 2009, the long gaps between record releases due in large part to an exhausting schedule.

On the international stage she won the UNESCO Prize, became an ambassador for the United Nations' Food and Agricultural Organisation, collaborated and recorded with Béla Fleck and Dee Dee Bridgewater, duetted live on French TV with Alicia Keys and featured on the soundtrack of *Beloved*, the film based on Toni Morrison's novel and starring Oprah Winfrey.

At home she built a significant business empire, owning and running a hotel (L'Hôtel Résidence Wassulu, conveniently located on the road from Bamako to its international airport), launching a range of 4x4 pick-ups and SUVs called the Oum Sang in partnership with a Chinese manufacturer and marketing Oumou Sangaré Rice, grown in her own fields.

Having left World Circuit after more than 20 years together, Oumou recently announced that she had signed to the French label No Format!, which will release her first new studio album in eight years in 2017. ♦



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BEST ALBUMS

Moussolou (World Circuit, 1991)
The stunning debut that sparked a musical revolution in Mali and introduced her to the world. Recently reissued in a deluxe edition on 180-gram vinyl and on CD in a hardback case with a 32-page booklet.

Ko Sira (World Circuit, 1993)
A brilliant follow-up that confirmed the arrival of one of Africa's great voices on a set that gets the balance just right between Western guitar and bass and traditional West African instrumentation.

Worotan (World Circuit, 1996)
This is an exquisitely sensitive Nick Gold production, the African musicians are augmented by Pee Wee Ellis' horn arrangements on four tracks and a lovely Nitin Sawhney cameo on acoustic guitar on the meditative closer 'Djortolen'.

Seya (World Circuit, 2009)
Surprisingly this was the first of Oumou's international albums to be recorded at home in Bamako – and after a 13-year gap since *Worotan*, it's also the most sophisticated and mature set of her career to date. A Top of the World in #58.

BEST COMPILATION

Oumou (World Circuit, 2003)
A two-disc career retrospective, containing a dozen of the best tracks from her first three albums plus eight new songs never previously released on CD, including her moving tribute to her mother on 'Magnoumako'. A Top of the World in #21.

IF YOU LIKE OUMO SANGARE, THEN TRY...

Fatoumata Diawara
Fatou (World Circuit, 2011)
Born in the Ivory Coast in 1982 into a family with ancestral Wassoulou roots, Fatoumata Diawara was introduced to World Circuit by Oumou. The result was this sparkling debut – which fittingly even includes a praise song to Oumou... A Top of the World in #79.