



Photos by Danny Willkens

Rokia Traoré

The Malian singer-songwriter continues to push the boundaries with her choice of collaborators and producers. **Jane Cornwell** reflects on her work to date

The daughter of a jazz-loving diplomat who moved from Mali to the Middle East, North Africa and Belgium, Rokia Traoré has never been a traditionalist. The title-track from her acclaimed 2013 album *Beautiful Africa* (a Top of the World in #91) sees her strapping on an electric Gretsch guitar to sing of the chaos in Mali and elsewhere in Africa, and of her faith in wisdom and peace. *'In my Afro-progressive veins burns Bambara blood infused with hope,'* she cries in her sweet, powerful voice.

Over the course of six albums, along with multi-media pieces, an African-take on Shakespeare and a seat on the 2015 Cannes Film Festival jury, this willowy, crop-haired mother-of-two has reinforced her reputation as an artistic intellectual. She's also a musician who loves to rock out.

One of six children, Rokia was born in 1974 in Kolokani, north-west Mali. All that moving from place to place meant she felt dislocated; she found solace in her parents' vinyl collection (Serge Gainsbourg, Billie Holiday,

Muddy Waters) and in the cassettes passed down by an elder brother: Dire Straits, Pink Floyd, a zillion hip-hop acts. She sang, too, and unusually for a West African woman, played guitar; aged 18 she raised the hackles of Mali's instrumental fraternity by appearing, with guitar, on Malian TV.

"I am sure all that early travelling changed my personality," says Rokia, who's based between Brussels and Bamako. "I went to school in different countries, experienced different cultures and listened to different music. I was encouraged to be independent and open-minded. It gave me the ability to do the music I do and think that anything is possible."

Having studied sociology at a lycée in Bamako, she was discouraged by friends and family from becoming a singer. Not because she wasn't born a *griot*, the storytellers who have preserve Malian traditions for centuries, but because her parents' elite circle was aghast that she'd throw away her formal education,

especially on a profession in which struggle and penury were the norm. Thankfully, the patronage of the late great Ali Farka Touré transformed her: "He told me don't try and play like anyone else. Like me, he was a self-learner. He said 'You're on your own path.'"

Rokia set about creating a body of uniquely modern West African music, sung in French and her native Bamana (English-language songs would come later), and set to instruments including the *balafon*, *kora* and that sharp-edged lute, the *ngoni*. In 1997 she won the RFI's (Radio France Internationale) prize for African Discovery of the Year, lending traction to her 1998 debut, *Mouneissa*, which sold 40,000 copies in Europe. She went on to break more boundaries by collaborating with Kronos Quartet, and in 2006

appeared in an Afrocentric multimedia work in Vienna, *Wati*, which was directed by opera maverick Peter Sellars and part of Mozart's 250th birthday celebrations.

Sellars would go on to helm *Desdemona*, a play by Nobel-Prize-winning novelist Toni Morrison that reimagined Shakespeare's *Othello*. Rokia portrayed Barbary, Desdemona's nurse, singing songs derived in part from the *Sundiata Epic*, the foundation poem of the Mali Empire. "We were redressing the balance: giving a history and background to *Othello* and telling the story of the play's female characters," she says. "Toni [Morrison] gives words to those who were not allowed to speak."

Rokia's Pan-Africanism and forward thinking dovetailed with that of Morrison, who "transformed" a set of Rokia-penned English lyrics on *Né So* (Home), her latest album, which is concerned with notions of refuge, home and respect: "There are so many things happening now that are related to the fact we have forgotten what respect is. To ourselves, to others, to the world."

Rokia is adamant that arts and culture will transform her beleaguered, beloved Mali ("The rest of the world has been giving us food and aid since independence [from France in 1960] and nothing has changed; it's getting worse"). And culture, she says, is about education, and letting people know their own merit. In 2009 she established the award-winning Fondation Passerelle (The Footbridge Foundation), a Bamako-based school that trains young musicians outside the griot system, encouraging professional careers.

She's as much a woman of action, then, as is she of thoughts and words. In 2014 her work with the UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, took her to Goudoubo Camp in Burkina Faso, host to some 10,000 Malian refugees who fled the conflict in the country's north. "There are still 167,000 Malian refugees between Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Niger," says Rokia. "The crisis is a forgotten one. I came to hear their stories. I came to ask for peace. The rest of humanity cannot allow for this to carry on."

Né So's spare, powerful title-track offers a timely reminder. *'Home, I'm going home,'* she sings and sometimes, whispers. *'So many wars, so many victims... So much sadness, so much confusion... So much hope.'* ♦

+ **ALBUM** *Né So*, is reviewed in this issue, p51

BEST ALBUMS

Mouneissa

(Label Bleu, 1998)

Acclaimed for its fresh take on Malian music – a first-time pairing of, say, a *balaba*, the large *balafon* of her region, with the *ngoni* – and for that controlled, bell-like voice. Folky, bold and graceful.

Wanita

(Indigo/Label Bleu, 2000)

Entirely written and arranged by Rokia, this is all understated elegance, melodic hooks, lush harmonies and hushed atmospherics. The likes of 'Souba', a track inspired by an Indian *raga*, hints at the experiments to come. Reviewed in #6.

Bowmboï

(Nonesuch, 2003)

Featuring contributions from Kronos Quartet and drawing comparisons with trailblazers such as Björk, *Bowmboï* scooped Album of the Year at the BBC Radio 3 Awards for World Music. 'Mariama', an intense duet with the singer Ousmane Sacko, is a highlight. A Top of the World review in #21.

Tchamantché

(2008, Nonesuch)

An album that throws a pop rhythm section and beat boxer in among African and Western classical instrumentation, and sees Rokia strapping on a Gretsch guitar for a blues rock sound. A Top of the World review in #55, it clinched her the Best Artist gong at the inaugural *Songlines Music Awards*.

Beautiful Africa

(Nonesuch, 2013)

This superbly crafted work is held to be Rokia's finest. Produced by John Parish (PJ Harvey, Tracey Chapman), it's an unabashedly rock-oriented yet still distinctly African record, with *ngoni* riffs on a par with guitars. It pulses with anger over the chaos in Mali before delivering a stunning paean to the Motherland. A Top of the World in #91.

IF YOU LIKE ROKIA TRAORÉ, THEN TRY...

Namvula

Shiwezwa

(Namvula, 2014)

Namvula Rennie was born in Zambia of mixed Zambian-Scottish parents; this debut references everything from traditional Zambian rhythms to Scottish folk and elements of jazz and Latin. Original songs are lifted by breezy lyrics sung in English, French, Portuguese and Lenje. Reviewed in #105.