

AFRO-CUBISM

Afro-Cubism is World Circuit's dream project. This was Nick Gold's original idea for the Buena Vista Social Club - a stellar collaboration of musicians from Mali and Cuba. 13 years ago, a tale of lost passports meant that the Africans never arrived and so instead, a rather fine but different record was made.

Now the original plan has finally been realised with an incredible group of musicians. Original invitees Cuban singer/guitarist Eliades Ochoa and the Malians Bassekou Kouyate (ngoni) and Djelimady Tounkara (electric guitar) are joined by Eliades' Grupo Patria, Toumani Diabate (kora), Kasse Mady Diabate (vocals) and Lasana Diabate (balafon).

This extraordinary band came together to record an album - to be released in October this year - and in the process have created a wonderful new sound.

ELIADES OCHOA guitar and vocals (born Songo le Maya, Cuba 1946)

With his trademark cowboy hat and penchant for wearing black, Eliades Ochoa has been dubbed 'Cuba's Johnny Cash'. There's more than a fashion statement in the comparison to America's greatest country singer, too, for Ochoa is a 'guajiro' (from the countryside) and a champion of rural Cuban styles such as son and guaracha. He is today recognised as amongst the greatest exponents of Santiago style son.

One of the younger members of the Buena Vista Social Club (and the first Cuban name on the original 'wants list' for the sessions that produced the original album), at 63 he's now become something of an elder statesman himself. He has been a professional musician for almost half a century. As a boy he earned a living singing and playing in the brothels and clubs of Santiago in the east of Cuba, a region famed for its music and known as 'the cradle of son'. For many years he was a regular at Santiago's famous Casa de la Trova and in 1978 he took over the leadership of Cuarteto Patria, a Cuban institution which by then had already been performing for almost 40 years. He recorded two albums with the group for the Mexican Corason label and in 1986 met the veteran singer Compay Segundo, who joined Cuarteto Patria for a time. While with the group Segundo recorded the original version of 'Chan Chan'.

A decade after their first meeting, Ochoa and Segundo famously reunited to perform the song as the opening track on the Grammy-winning Buena Vista Social Club. To that album Eliades also contributed lead vocals on El Cuarto de Tula, and his own guajira showcase on 'El Carretero'. Since Buena Vista, he has recorded several fine albums under his own name including 'Cubafrika' (1998) with the great Cameroonian saxophonist Manu Dibango; 'Sublime Ilusión' (1999); 'Tributo a Cuarteto Patria' (2000) and 'Estoy Como Nunca' (2002). He continues to lead Cuarteto Patria and to tour regularly around the world.

FODE LASSANA DIABATE (balafon, born Conakry, Guinea, 1971)

Born in Guinea into a family of virtuoso balafon players, Lassana Diabate moved as a young man to Bamako in the early 1990s. He has since become feted as Mali's most gifted player of the 22-key xylophone of the Mande griots, appearing on albums by Salif Keita, Bassekou Kouyate, Kasse Mady Diabate among others and has been a long-standing member of Toumani Diabate's Symmetric Orchestra.

An innovator on his instrument, he has developed a technique of playing two balafons simultaneously, tuned a semi-tone apart, extending the harmonic range of what is a fixed pitch instrument and allowing greater scope for improvisation.

KASSÉ MADY DIABATÉ (vocals, born Kangaba, Mali 1949)

Together with Salif Keita, Kasse Mady is today considered Mali's greatest male vocalist. Now in his early 60s, the veteran griot singer began performing with the Super Mande orchestra more than 40 years ago. He went on to become lead vocalist with Las Maravillas de Mali (later known as National Badema du Mali, a band famous for reworking traditional Mande songs into a Cuban dance band format). He recorded his debut solo album, 'Fode', in Paris in 1989. An electric, dance-based recording produced by Ibrahima Sylla, he followed it a year later with a contrasting album of acoustic griot songs, Kela Tradition (1990).

After a decade in Paris, he returned to Mali in 1998 and joined Taj Mahal, Toumani Diabate and Bassekou Kouyate on the recording of 'Kulanjan' and became one of the lead vocalists with Toumani's Symmetric Orchestra.

Afro-Cubism is not the first time he has worked with Cuban musicians, for the late Buena Vista Social Club star Cachaito Lopez guested on his 2003 solo album 'Kassi Kasse'. His most recent solo album 'Manden Djeli Kan' appeared in 2009.

TOUMANI DIABATE kora (born Bamako, Mali 1965)

One of the most significant musicians in Africa, Toumani Diabate is the leading exponent of the kora, the west African harp. He is a griot (hereditary musician) descended from a long family lineage of kora masters.

His father Sidiki Diabate was the country's leading exponent of the instrument. A child prodigy, he recorded his debut album Kaira in London in

1986 at the age of 21. Playing bass, rhythm, melody and improvising solos simultaneously on the instrument's 21 strings, it was the first ever album of solo kora music and the start of a remarkable international career.

In addition to his mastery of Malian music's traditions he is an innovative and experimental collaborator. He recorded the two acclaimed Songhai fusion albums with the Spanish flamenco group Ketama and has worked with Damon Albarn, Bjork, and the London Symphony Orchestra (LSO) amongst others. His collaboration with Taj Mahal on 1999's 'Kulanjan' explored the connections between west African music and the blues and was cited by Barrack Obama as his favourite album during the presidential election campaign.

In more traditional vein, he has recorded widely with most of the greatest names in Malian music, both on his own albums and guesting on releases by singers such as Salif Keita and

Kasse Mady Diabaté. In recent years, he has recorded a series releases for World Circuit, including two albums of kora-guitar duets with Ali Farka Toure, including the Grammy-winning 'In the Heart of the Moon' (2004) and 'Ali and Toumani' (2010); 'Boulevard de l'Indépendance' (2005) with his groundbreaking Symmetric Orchestra; and the acoustic solo kora collection The Mandé Variations (2008).

BASSEKOU KOUYATE (ngoni, born Garana, Mali, 1966)

Descended from a long line of griots, Bassekou Kouyate was born in the Segou region of Mali, where his mother was a famous singer and his father was a celebrated ngoni player. At the age of 16, Bassekou took his father's place and by the end of the 1980s he had joined Toumani Diabate's Symmetric Orchestra.

Since then he has revolutionized the playing of the ngoni, adding extra strings to give him a wider melodic range and inventing new plucking methods to allow faster runs and more versatility. He is today regarded as the instrument's greatest practitioner. As an accompanist, he went on to record with a wide variety of performers, including Youssou N'dour, Taj Mahal and Ali Farka Toure (including the latter's celebrated 'Savane'), before forming the first ngoni band Ngoni Ba and making his debut as a band leader on Segu Blue, which won the 2007 BBC 3 award for world music as best album. He followed it in 2009 with a second album, 'I Speak Fula'.

DJELIMADY TOUNKARA (electric guitar, born Kita, Mali, 1947)

Arguably the finest guitarist in Mali, Djelimady Tounkara was born in the musical village of Kita and grew up playing drums and the xalam (lute). His parents wanted him to become an Islamic cleric but the plan was abandoned as soon as he saw and heard his first guitar. After early success playing in the Kita regional band, by the mid-1960s he had moved to Bamako, where he joined Misra Jazz on electric guitar before he was promoted to join the state-sponsored Orchestre National as rhythm guitarist. (It was with this group that he travelled with Ali Farka Toure to the Sofia Festival in 1968).

After the Orchestra National was disbanded, he joined the now legendary Rail Band in 1972, playing at the Buffet Hotel de la Gare, next to Bamako's train station in a line-up that included the singers Salif Keita and Mory Kante.

With the Rail Band in it's glory days he mastered a great variety of styles including pop, Afro-Beat, funk, Afro-Cuban and Congolese rumba. Between 1977 and 1980 he moved to Abidjan in the Ivory Coast where he performed and recorded regularly. On his return to Bamako he led the successful Mandingo Trio before being invited in 1981 to rejoin The Rail Band (later renamed the Super Rail Band) as it's musical director and main soloist. Tounkara still fronts The Rail Band today and also leads his own acoustic band. In addition to appearing on the majority of the Rail Band's classic recordings, he has also released the solo acoustic albums, Sigui (2001) and Solon Kono (2006).

Line up

Eliades Ochoa - Lead guitar and lead vocal

Toumani Diabaté - Kora

Bassekou Kouyate – Ngoni

Kasse Mady Diabaté – Vocal

Djelimady Tounkara – Guitar

Lassana Diabaté – Balafons

Osnel Odit – Guitar

Jose A. Martinez – Double bass

Jorge Maturell – Congas and bongos

Eglis Ochoa – Maracas

Lennis Lara – Trumpet

Alain A. Dragonit – Trumpet

Baba Sissoko - Tamani