



OUMOU SANGARE

BIOGRAPHY

Oumou Sangare was born in Bamako, Mali in 1969. When Oumou was two years old, her father took a second wife and emigrated to Côte d'Ivoire, leaving Oumou's mother, who was pregnant at the time, and their three small children. The struggle to keep the family afloat was the backdrop to Oumou's childhood. Oumou's mother was a singer and her main source of income was the 'sumu' (wedding and baptism celebrations organised by women) or 'street parties' as Oumou calls them. "My mother's still a fighter" says Oumou. "She brought up six children on her own, with no money. Sometimes all she could find to feed us with was wild herbs. Oumou accompanied her mother to the sumus from the age of five, and very soon was in demand in her own right. She thrived in the atmosphere of these parties, fired in equal measure by her passion for the music and by her desire to help her mother out by earning a little extra cash. By the age of thirteen Oumou had become the family breadwinner. "That's what has given me strength in my life. It was a very hard childhood and it gave me an incredible character. I can face up to any obstacle".

"At the age of eighteen, Lamine Sidibe, the director of Mali's Instrumental Ensemble, spotted me singing in the street. After that, I joined Bamba Dembélé's 'Djoliba Percussion' band (which also included a young Toumani Diabaté), and went with them on a European tour. I was the youngest singer in the troupe but I managed to make a niche for myself. On stage, the audience would be asking for more. That's how I learned to have confidence in myself. I was singing songs from Coumba Sidibé's repertoire." Oumou credits Coumba Sidibé, Wassulu's famous female singer for teaching her the values of purity, simplicity and vocal freshness.

Oumou's mother is from Wassoulou, the remote forest region in the south of Mali which boasts a rich and distinctive culture. Wassoulou music was very different from the prevailing griot-based music of the dance bands. It had strong, hypnotic dance rhythms based on the rural ceremonies celebrating harvests and hunting and that set the pace of life in Wassoulou villages. And in contrast to the Mandé griots that focus more on the wealthy and the powerful, the lyrics talk about more general aspects of life. Oumou's vision from the outset was to bring the power and charm of this music into her own songs.

"When I got back to Bamako I formed my own band, with a flute-player, a percussionist and a kamele ngoni (youth's harp) player. Then I appeared on ORTM (the national Malian Radio and Television Broadcasting Authority). The next day, an admirer sent me a brand new Yamaha Dan motorbike! That gave me the confidence to keep singing and follow my path"

Around this time she came into contact with the bass player and arranger Ahmadou Ba Guindo, leader of the legendary National Badema dance band which played traditional music on modern instruments. (Following his death in a car accident in 1991, Oumou paid

tribute to Ahmadou Ba Guindo in the magnificent '*Saa Magni*', which features on her album ***Ko Sira*** ('Modern Marriage'), released by World Circuit in 1993). Ahmadou gathered a group of musicians around Oumou including Aliou Traore who played western violin (and who had studied music in Havana, Cuba as a cultural exchange student) and the guitarist, Boubacar Diallo, from her first album who had also played in the National Badema. At the core of the group was a young kamele ngoni player named 'Benego' Brehima Diakite who has remained Oumou's main musical collaborator to this day. Oumou believes that "Today Benego is really the best player in the world, even of all time."

In 1989, after some persuasion – wary of the pitfalls that could await her if the album was not successful -, she recorded her first album ***Moussoulou*** ('Women'). It was recorded in Abidjan with arrangements by Ahmadou Ba Guindo and released on the 4th of January 1990, and it took West Africa by storm. She was 21 years old. Her songs talked openly about subjects that no one had dared express before in public in this fundamentally conservative society and caused endless debate amongst the Malian population. The album's messages were powerful - encouraging women to seek personal freedom to be themselves and have dignity, warning against the wrongs of polygamy and forced marriage and even covered the taboo subject of female sensuality, such as her stunning hit song "Diaraby Nene" (the Shivers of Passion). This was all the more remarkable because of her chosen idiom - a slightly modernised, traditional, rural, Wassoulou hunters' music, delivered with a funk-driven pulse.

The true impact of 'Moussoulou' is still hard to gauge. The release of this cassette with its striking, deceptively simple and direct sound rocketed the previously unknown Oumou Sangare to huge fame and notoriety and its unprecedented success meant it provided a non-stop, all-enveloping soundtrack to Bamako's homes, markets, shops, cars and buses.

The cassette was brought to the attention of Nick Gold of World Circuit Records by Ali Farka Touré, and Gold witnessed the phenomenon during a trip to Bamako in 1991. "You couldn't escape that music. And you didn't want to. 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 that week in Bamako hearing Oumou wherever I went. And I mean EVERYWHERE."

Since that day when Ali introduced Nick to Oumou, telling him "Ça c'est de la musique", Oumou has enjoyed a long and illustrious career, touring internationally and becoming the greatest female African star of her generation. She is recognised as the "songbird of Wassoulou" and an ambassador for the music of Mali, quite an achievement for an output of just five extraordinary albums in a twenty-year career.

Through records like '**Ko Sira**' and '**Worotan**' (meaning 10 kola nuts – the price given by a groom's parents in exchange for a bride), Oumou has continued to sing about the issues close to her heart, encouraging better conditions for women in society. After becoming a mother herself, she also focuses on her desire to defend children who are in difficult circumstances.

During the last twenty years time she has noticed a lot of changes. "Mali has developed considerably. Today, the female population outnumbers the male. Women now play a greater role in Mali's development. It is hard for a country to move forward without its women. We have to have freedom of speech, the freedom to express ones self, to love and to choose a husband. Democracy is working. The people of Mali are free. As an

artist, I am also free to say what I think.”

She fights fiercely against female circumcision. “I think the country has made progress regarding female circumcision. When it was decided to abolish the practice, people were singing in the streets. The law is respected now. I think people are aware of the problems it causes. And I opened the way, to a certain extent. A lot of people now ask me for advice. The women of Mali and other African countries still continue the fight. I’ve shown them what they can do. I always encourage them, and I provide an example. I’ve sung hard to support them. My fight has always been positive, otherwise I would have quickly been discouraged. And I get a lot of support these days: ‘We’re with you!’”

This support often shows itself in something as simple as a smile or a compliment when people meet her in the street. At home in Bamako, where Oumou has remained very close to her audience, greeted and recognised wherever she goes, there is an air of natural sincerity about her that is completely genuine. “I feel relaxed here, I don’t need security. I’m friends with everyone. People are always stopping me for a chat. My fans look after me,” she explains, laughing, as if to ward off the inaccessible image of a star of her calibre. “I’m not allowed to make mistakes here in Mali. It’s what dictates my career abroad. It’s also why I take my own sweet time. I once sang with Oprah in the film ‘Beloved’. That gave me some ideas. I would love to make a film. I’d like to play the kind of woman that would set a good example. It would be a childhood dream taken care of, for me.”

Although she may have a superstar status at home, she never forgets where she came from, or the virtues of a humble background.

In October 2003 she was appointed as global Ambassadors of the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), a role that forms part of the FAO’s struggle against famine. She also plays an active role in Mali’s Mother and Children Association, donating millet, milk and rice to mothers in need. She believes it is the duty for those who are born under a lucky star to provide for others less fortunate than them.

In recent years she has been focusing on setting up in business.

The Hotel Wassulu was built in response to the Malian government’s appeal to provide more hotel accommodation for visitors to the Africa Cup of Nations, which was hosted in Bamako in 2002. However, Oumou also finds it useful for accommodating the large groups of visitors and friends from abroad that she meets on her travels, from New York to Paris. “I gave it that name because I wanted Wassoulou to be engraved in the memory of all Malians and it made me proud to be able to help create jobs for people”

“I make the most of my fame. My name sells things. With Oum Sang, I launched my own brand of car. I was invited by the Chinese brand Go Now. My son Cherif was really excited about me doing this and I also wanted to help people by offering less expensive cars than the competitors. The President of Mali was so pleased that he even came to a special opening ceremony of the car showroom to cut the ribbon!”

In the Bamako market places, you can even find ‘Oumou Sangaré Rice’. I don’t make any money out of it, but I help make sales. People like to have my name on the things they need. I’ve also got my own farm in Baguineda, near the river, about forty kilometres from Bamako. The main crops are oranges, mandarins and a lot of maize.

But her business activities don't stop her from singing. This naturally energetic woman is sometimes away performing for three months without a break. She appears almost all over Africa, from Morocco to South Africa, by way of Nigeria and Burkina Faso. And when she's at home in Bamako, if she's not being asked to perform at private ceremonies, she'll be found singing at the Hotel Wassulu at the weekends.

Oumou also continues to perform at selected dates around the world.

In 2003 she promoted the release of the 2CD collection simply titled 'Oumou', a retrospective look at her career to date. The album features 12 of the best tracks from her first three World Circuit albums, plus 8 tracks previously unreleased on CD (including 6 tracks from the best-selling Mali cassette 'Laban'). The tour included an incredible performance at WOMAD that was hailed by critics as one of the best in the festival's history. 2004 found her performing at "Global Divas" in a show that also featured Tracey Chapman at the Hollywood Bowl in the US. That year was rounded off with an amazing, live duet on French TV with the multi-Grammy winning R&B superstar Alicia Keys.

This year she is invited to perform at Harvard University's celebrations to mark the 60th year since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In 2009, as well as headlining at the Segou festival in Mali, she will be coming to Europe for a series of dates.

On stage her natural presence, huge charisma, irrepressible energy and joie de vivre is very much in evidence. Yet it's her voice that holds you spellbound. "Here in Mali, everyone knows the way instruments sound naturally. And singing, for me, is a natural truth. I've always known how to manipulate my voice. It's still the same after twenty years, even if I've often sung too much in my life, sometimes going on tour for two or three months without a break."

Oumou's latest album "**Seya**", (Joy) released in 2009, has taken around two or three years to come to fruition. "I choose my songs very carefully. I learn how to put them across first on the stage." Her music is bold, seductive, funky and vibrant, but it's her lyrics that open people's eyes. "For me, the lyrics are more important than the melody. I write almost all my own words. I also perform the classics of Malian tradition. I draw a lot of inspiration from what happens in society. As soon as I see or feel something, I write it down. I say what I want, and what I think, because I am a free woman. I believe that my music has had an impact on the life of African women."

"It's true that when I sing it's joyful but in amongst that joy I always take the opportunity to slip in messages that educate my nation."

Oumou continues the battle to encourage equality between men and women and sings about universal themes in life such as love, death, destiny, respect for each other, hope and harmony, not forgetting a couple of light-hearted tunes about the fun things in life.

"The track 'Seya' is about a girl who has a good time. She brings joy. It's dedicated to my tailors and my stylists and those that dye the cloth.

I wanted to show the courage of Malian women. They radiate every colour on this earth. I go to them for my hand-printed outfits in 'bazin' and 'tissu wax' fabrics. I give a lot of my clothes away, I don't keep them." Which explains why you hardly ever see Oumou in the same outfit twice.

Standing almost six foot tall, she is an elegant and feminine woman, sure of her taste and with a huge love of fashion. In one day, Oumou might change her look several times. She

delights in surprising people, one moment the American R&B star, the next a dynamic businesswoman, or then again a real Malian diva in her traditional boubou. She bursts out laughing. "I possess the art of metamorphosis. In a boubou or in jeans, I'm unrecognisable."

An icon and a role model for modern women she is both keen to encourage and embrace new ideas through her music whilst at the same time she holds a deep respect for tradition and for those who have come before her. On the track 'Donso', she pays a moving tribute to her father. "My father lived as an imam in Abidjan. When the war broke out in 2002, he came back to Bamako. I forgave him for having left us when I was two years old. I had a house built for him and his wife. He was still my father, you can't erase a blood connection. So we made up, and my parents were reconciled. I sent him on a pilgrimage to Mecca. I've always wanted a father. It used to make me cry. He said he was sorry: "You were too little when I left." He always kept up with my career. We were very close. He died in a car accident in 2005. My father was tolerant, ready to ask forgiveness from everybody. When we finally met again, I saw he was a gentle man, with generous heart that I had discovered too late. He advised me to pray a lot." This reunion with her father helped Oumou find a new serenity in her life.

Oumou is an artist who is proud of her country and its diverse cultures, now recognised and appreciated throughout the world. "Mali is a country of oral tradition, which explains why music and society here are part of each other. The 32 different ethnic groups here each have their own well-developed culture. They don't need each other to make good music, even though cross-fertilisation is always good. There should still be a lot more recognition for Malian music. I deeply respect each individual artist in Mali. Our potential is incredible. Mali and its music embody the symbol of a free and victorious Africa."

***Note on spelling of Wassoulou/ Wasulu.**

Wassulu is the Bambara spelling.

Wassoulou is the French spelling.