HARTFORD Advocate

Date: Thursday, February 18, 2010
Location: HARTFORD, CT
Circulation (DMA): 70,000 (28)
Type (Frequency): Newspaper (W)
Page: A23
Keyword: Bassekou Kouyate & Ngoni ba

String Theory

Meet Bassekou Kouyate, master of the ngoni, the West African ancestor of the banjo

By John Adamian

Bassekou Kouyate and Ngoni Ba
With Bela Fleck and the Africa Project, Feb. 25, at the Jorgenson Center for the Performing Arts, Storrs, (860) 486-4226, www.jorgensen.uconn.edu

When Malian musician Bassekou Kouyate and his band Ngoni Ba take the stage at UConn this week, they'll be introducing many Americans to a long-lost instrumental relative.

When you think of the banjo — if you *ever* think of the banjo — your mind may conjure the sounds of the blistering bluegrass from the opening of "The Beverly Hillbillies" or the more rickety theme from *Deliverance*. The point is, in pop culture the banjo has become a sonic shorthand for, at best, charming hayseeds, and, at worst, for homicidal rednecks. (Irate fans of Dock Boggs and Bascom Lamar Lunsford can send hate mail.) But, putting aside the music's rich repertory here, the banjo has a deep and fascinating multi-cultural history. It's the descendant of a West African instrument, the ngoni, with a tradition stretching back centuries, one associated with the stories of empires and noble lineage.

Word of this surprising root to America's musical family tree is getting out though. Last year American banjo master Bela Fleck (who presides over the UConn show) released a documentary, *Throw Down Your Heart* (featuring Kouyate), in which he explored the banjo's African origins. And, as proof of how West African influences continue to flow into America's musical bloodstream, Kouyate and Ngoni Ba's new record, *I Speak Fula*, just came out earlier this month ... on Sub Pop Records, home of Nirvana, the Shins and Fleet Foxes, among others.

Something unexpected has happened in the world of American indie rock. The genre, long the exclusive domain of downward-glancing skinny white college kids who almost seemed to get uncomfortable around a backbeat, has now embraced what you might call world music. Elements of Brazilian samba, Balkan music and Indian ragas have all been synthesized into the music. Add to that list the vast reserves of tradition, virtuosity, funk and soul that can be found in the fertile music cultures of West Africa.

Traditionally the ngoni is often played by the griots or djelis, the caste of musical bards in parts of West Africa, to accompany storytelling. But artists like Kouyate — who was taught by his father, a famous griot steeped in the music of Mali's Bamana people — are modernizing the instrument, adding amplification, rock flourishes and re-introducing Malians to the instrument as well.

Kouyate, answered some questions about his career and Malian music, via e-mail, through a translator, last week.

"I learned from my father," he wrote. "I could not have had a better teacher, and serious work started when I was about 11 years old. He showed me the right way to play in our tradition, and wouldn't put up with second best: just the sort of training a young musician needs. There was no outside influence in the village: no school, no radio or TV, and no trips to town, so what we learned was the pure Bamana tradition. It was when I went to [the capital] Bamako as a young man that I began to hear new styles like jazz, mostly on the radio and gramophone, but I was already too involved in my own tradition to be influenced by them, even if I liked to listen and could tell when the musicians were good."

If, with the tour and the Fleck documentary, Americans are learning more about these traditions, the same is true for Malians, some of whom are only now coming to understand the profound influence that their music has

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had on the culture of the African Diaspora, African-American music and on music around the world. Mali is about the size of Texas. Much of it is desert. It's a landlocked country, but its cultural reach is huge.

"Just as you are learning about our instruments, we are learning about the banjo and its history," says Kouyate. "I am now looking forward to showing our audiences in Mali, and our learner musicians, how this can be traced, and what it tells us about our history as well as yours."

Kouyate and his band may offer some lessons in the shared musical history between America and Africa, but he's also in the business of telling his countrymen about the ngoni.

"Interestingly it is in Mali that people are discovering the ngoni," he says. "It seems that a new ngoni group starts up every week in Bamako, and they all want me to come and listen. Until Ngoni Ba became well known, people were just about to forget the instrument."

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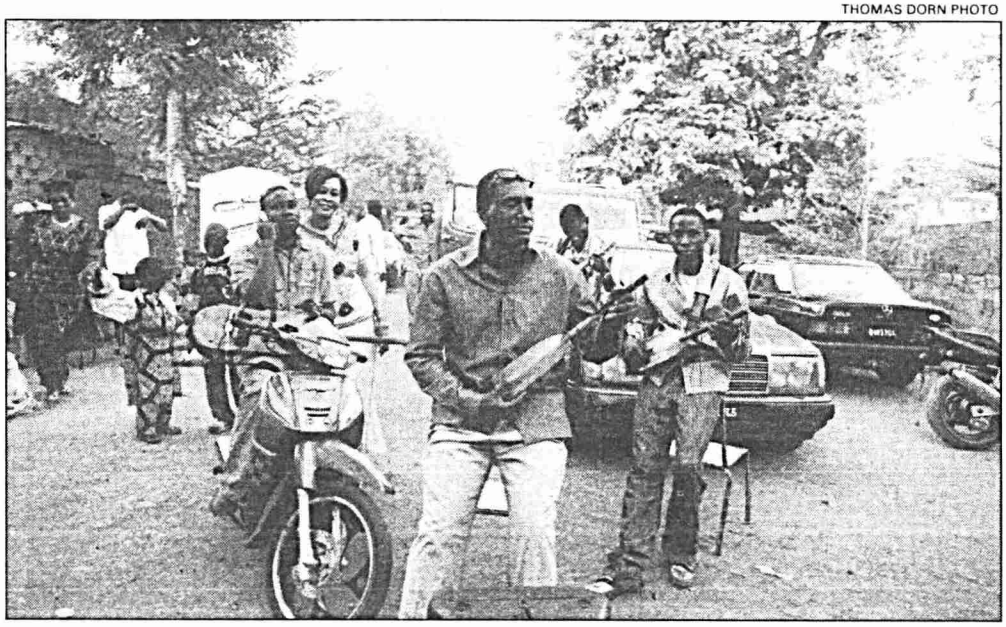

Bassekou Kouyate and Ngoni Ba, bringing ngoni back.

Account: 11309 (1887)
CT-31
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