

World music

Rokia Traoré: Né So review - pained and intimate set from Malian singer

★★★★★

(Nonesuch)



Quietly urgent ... Rokia Traoré. Photograph: Danny Willems

[Rokia Traoré](#) has changed direction, yet again. Her last album, [Beautiful Africa](#), was her most commercial, rock-influenced set to date, memorable for its blend of energy, anger and fine, personal songs. Now she's back, with the same producer, John Parish, the same instrumental lineup (guitars, including her own electric guitar, bass, drums and ngoni) but a very different approach. The slinky, repeated riffs are more sparse than before, and the mood is darker and more personal, with quietly urgent, thoughtful songs of advice to Mali's politicians and a rejection of violence influenced by events in her homeland. The best songs are left until last: Kolokani, a reflection on African village life and values; a breathy, soulful reworking of Billie Holiday's Strange Fruit; and the partly spoken title track, which concerns the refugee crisis. Less commercial than her last album, maybe, but it's a finely sung, pained and intimate set.

Robin Denselow

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[HTTP://WWW.AFROPOP.ORG/33068/DESERT-BLUES-ROKIA-TRAORE-AT-NYCS-SYMPHONY-SPACE/](http://www.afropop.org/33068/desert-blues-rokia-traore-at-nycs-symphony-space/)

DESERT BLUES: ROKIA TRAORÉ AT NYC'S SYMPHONY SPACE

by Carolina Amoruso, December 2, 2016



No sooner had the air cleared in New York after a freak storm the evening of Oct. 30, than Rokia Traoré took command of the Symphony Space stage on Manhattan's Upper West Side, raining down a superlative storm of rock 'n' roll thunder seared by African traditional and latter-day "desert blues" lightning.

Rokia is now a Malian superstar, firmly in the upper echelons of her country's cadre of strong, gifted female artists. It's been a long journey from the refined

and fetching innocence of her early tours, nearly 20 years ago, when her acoustic guitar was her traveling companion, and her bags were filled with heartfelt and tender melodies, many her own.

Today, she leads a cultural delegation of West Africans and one Italian primed to vaunt her coming of age—her voice and its vibrato more nuanced now, as she's piled on timbres unrevealed in those early years. Her compositions and arrangements reflect the span of her emotional range, righteous and engaging, coquettish and intimate. Driven from Bamako by the civil war and coup that engulfed Mali in 2012, her music has always explored the subtlety and complexity of her life, from poignant songs of love and loneliness, to the damage done to people and spirit by violence and hatred, to her own search for place as an African, a woman and an artist.

Lest one think this show was “all about Rokia,” the evening was ultimately a tribute to her country's legacy of birthing the blues, and to the reunion of that heritage with its ultimate American heir, blues-borne rock ‘n’ roll.

Close your eyes and in your left speaker are the pared-down quintessentially African sounds of Mamah Diabaté's *ngoni*, weaving in the dry pluckings of down home, while the right speaker reports the riotous rocking of Stefano Pilia's oversized Fender. Open your eyes now and Moise Ouattara's trap set and Zonatan Dembélé's electric bass (Burkina Faso and Mali, respectively) anoint the glorious marriage of civilizations.

After a healthy encore, the crowd spilled out onto upper Broadway that balmy Sunday night. Rokia Traoré and her troupe had proved to all that global warming is real and upon us, and comes in many forms—some that affect the weather, others that lift the heart.

The concert is the latest offering in the World Music Institute's Desert Blues series, which began with a stellar show by the Malian bluesman Vieux Farka Touré on Oct. 1. Upcoming are the legendary Malian guitarist Boubacar Traoré on Dec. 2 and Noura Mint Seymali of Mauritania on Feb. 24, 2017. Check the World Music Institute website for details. <http://www.worldmusicinstitute.org>

Photo credit: Michael Fleshman

Photos by Danny Uillems

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.

Bowmboi
(Nonesuch, 2003)
Featuring contributions from Kronos Quartet and drawing comparisons with trailblazers such as Björk, *Bowmboi* 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
Shiwezwwa
(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.

ROKIA TRAORÉ | NÉ SO

WHAT THE CRITICS SAY

'Brave, challenging and arrestingly original, Traoré may just have gone and made the finest indie-rock album to emerge from arguably the world's most musical continent.'

– **Uncut**, 8/10

'A thing of delicacy, silky, immersive grooves and intertwined guitars weaving a subtly seductive canvas.' – **Mojo** ★★★★★

'A sound that reflects the gravity of Traoré's experience. Since her last album she's seen her homeland torn apart by a brutal civil war. Traoré is an anomalous figure. A diplomat's daughter, equally at home in Africa and Europe, she might seem like someone who doesn't belong anywhere. Yet at borderline-desperate times like these we need someone with her kind of genuinely global overview.' – **Daily Telegraph** ★★★★★

'Despite the world, this is an album that glows with life and points to progress.' – **fRoots**

'Traoré has changed direction, yet again. The slinky, repeated riffs are more sparse than before, and the mood is darker and more personal, with quietly urgent, thoughtful songs of advice to Mali's politicians and a rejection of violence influenced by events in her homeland. A finely sung, pained and intimate set.' – **Guardian** ★★★★★

'The most bravely experimental female singer in Africa returns. Backing is provided by guitars and *n'goni*, special guests include John Paul Jones and Devendra Banhart, and highlights include an exquisite treatment of Billie Holiday's 'Strange Fruit'.'

– **Guardian, The Most Unmissable Culture of 2016**

'Traoré has made the album of her career. The joy of *Né So* is in its simplicity. 'Tu Voles' consists of little more than Traoré's pure, high voice, the lightest of rhythms and a fluid guitar line that could be construed as either authentically African or something that fell down the back of Dire Straits' sofa. It builds in momentum, not with bombast but with jazzy nuance, and you can't help but feel that Traoré's restrained approach shows up most pop stars as massive show-offs. This accessible yet sophisticated album offers its own defiance against hard times.' – **The Times, Album of the Week** ★★★★★

'Once again, Mali's most intellectual singer teams up with John Parish. These are songs of displacement, from the "intercontinental metropolitan" narrator of the minimalist 'Kolokani' looking back on the "ancestral values" of her African homeland, to the title track's dense maze of guitar, *ngoni* and mandolin, through which Traoré and Parish reflect angrily on the refugee crisis.' – **Financial Times** ★★★★★

'Traoré continues to cut a singular trajectory through modern music.' – **Observer** ★★★★★

'That Traoré has become one of the most respected West African musicians of her generation can be divined by the line-up on *Né So*, testament to a career spent expanding the boundaries of Malian music while staying true to its essential spirit. An artist very much at the top of her game.' – **Record Collector** ★★★★★

'Returning queen Traoré has developed and refined a songwriting style that mixes rock and African elements in an unusually restrained, intimate and even schematic manner.'

– **Independent On Sunday** ★★★★★

'Sinuous and poised, the combination of West African rhythms and an understated rock pulse is never less than elegant. Traoré's exhortatory lyrics are often closer to slogans than poetry. Then again, her troubled country is passing through unpoetic times.'

– **Sunday Times**

'A taut indie-rock album which retains a thrilling African sensibility.' – **Hi-Fi Choice**