

Massa Dembele Mezana Dounia

Izniz Records (34 mins)

★★★★★

There's a griot goin on



Massa Dembele is a *jeli* (griot) from Burkina Faso who plays the *kamalengoni*. It's a bridged harp-lute not dissimilar to the *kora*, but with significantly fewer strings and a more twangy sound. It's not a traditional instrument for a *jeli*, but in Dembele's hands, it sounds perfectly natural.

This album – and especially the title-track 'Mezana Dounia' – are lovely examples of Dembele's stripped-back, minimalist sound, often featuring just his multi-tracked and interlocking *kamalengoni* lines and haunting falsetto voice with occasional percussion.

There are guests on two pieces playing the *balafon* (wooden xylophone) and *folikan* (flute), both which like all else here, are used simply but effectively. But Dembele plays all of the other instruments on the album. While his skills as an instrumentalist are obvious, his real trade is his stories, so it's very useful that this release has gathered English translations of every song, available to view online. The songs – which are all self-penned – are tales of changing cultures, emotional ponderings on the modern world, and calls for social justice. This is a very short album, only just passing the half-hour mark, but it is nevertheless a very impressive debut from a musician putting his own spin on an ancient tradition.

JIM HICKSON

TRACK TO TRY *Mezana Dounia*

Oumar Konaté Live in America

Clermont Music (48 mins)

★★★★★

Live album from sideman to the Malian stars



Over the last few years, Oumar Konaté has been making his mark on the Mali guitar scene, his

guitar-bass-drums trio mixing traditional Songhai grooves with raucous Jimi Hendrix-esque solos.

For this album, three performances were recorded from Konaté's US tour back in 2014. Given the year, it is no surprise that there are no as-yet-unheard tracks; all the pieces

TOP
OF THE
WORLD
TRACK 3

Makan Badjé Tounkara Daba

Buda Musique (54 mins)

★★★★★

The lute, the whole lute and (almost) nothing but the lute



The simple, unaffected, sound of the traditional *ngoni* (lute) is one of West Africa's most distinctive and evocative musical delights. In Mali it is the stringed instrument most associated to the troubadour-like tradition of the *jeli* or *griot* (West African praise singer or storyteller). *Ngoni* player Makan 'Badjé' Tounkara is from a griot family – his grandfather Djeli Baba Sissoko being one of the most celebrated of them. Tounkara has worked with many of the most famous singers from Mali, Guinea and Senegal and this is his third solo album. He is steeped in tradition but he is also an innovator, having added three more strings to the conventionally four-stringed *ngoni*. It is evident on

included are from his first two albums, 2014's *Addoh* and 2016's *Maya Maya*. Normally for a live album, that would be no problem, except here, although everything was recorded in concert, it's difficult to tell that just by listening. The high-quality recordings and the barely audible crowd noise remove

that electric atmosphere of being at a great concert, and make the album feel more like a set of alternate takes from past works than a live set.

Musically, Konaté's skills as a guitarist are not in doubt, and he pulls off the different styles with ease, but what is lacking is any great originality

Daba that this gives him great instrumental flexibility. The album is an exceptionally pleasing mix of instrumentals and vocal tracks.

Some of the music is stripped back all the way – just the arid sound of solo *ngoni* – while other songs have two or three additional lutes and percussion accompaniment. Awa Tounkara sings lead on several songs; she is a fine female singer with rich earthy tones. The virtuoso instrumental playing really makes this disc stand out, particularly the way Makan Badjé Tounkara bends occasional notes to give them a blues flavour, as on the instrumental track 'Océan' with its splendid bubbling talking drum accompaniment.

MARTIN SINNOCK

TRACK TO TRY *Océan*

that would take these particular performances from proficient to exciting. Maybe you had to be there.

It's probably a better move to check out Konaté's earlier studio albums and wait for some new material instead.

JIM HICKSON

TRACK TO TRY *Shanku Shara*

Takeifa Gass Giss

Keyzit (38 mins)

★★★★★

Baaba Maal guests on sunny Senegalese pop album



Takeifa like to keep it in the family: the five members are all siblings. The four brothers and a sister from the Keita family from Senegal bring together guitar, drums, bass, voice and a bit of rapping to create a mix of pop, soul and what they call 'Afro-rock.'

Gass Giss – which in Wolof means 'Whoever Searches Will Find' – is the band's third album but it doesn't offer much to help it stand out in the

crowd, even with special guest Baaba Maal who provides vocals on the lead single 'Ndanane'. (Maal also appears in the video for this track, partaking in some very stiff dancing and singing in an open-top Citroën 2CV).

The heavier the music gets, the more fun it becomes, so it's a shame it doesn't flex its muscles more often. The track 'Fire' has a heavy beat and distorted guitar melting into a blasting flute solo, but falls back into bland pop before too long. There are enjoyable moments here and there – 'Supporter' has some cool raps, for example – but if you want cheerful, cheesy Afro-pop, there are many better examples to choose from than this.

JIM HICKSON

TRACK TO TRY *Ndanane*

The Cape Verdean singer and guitarist Tcheka returns with a new, self-released album



Sara Matos

Tcheka Boka Kafé

Tchekamusic (38 mins)

★★★★★

Tchek it out: fifth album from masterful singer and guitarist



Manuel Lopes Andrade, better known simply as Tcheka, is a guitarist and singer from Cape Verde,

the former Portuguese colony off the coast of Senegal. Along with the excellent Mayra Andrade and Lura, he enjoyed success in the years when his homeland was rightly considered to be one of the great world music centres, thanks to the massive popularity of the late Cesaria Evora. The islands don't enjoy quite so much publicity these days, but this gloriously confident and varied album proves that Tcheka is still making great music. This is his fifth album, and his first for six years; in many ways it's his bravest to date.

For the most part it's a solo set, and only on the final track is he joined by his co-producer, the Portuguese pianist Mário Laginha. It succeeds because he is both a remarkable singer and an impressive acoustic guitarist. The starting point is the rhythmic Cape Verde style of *batuku*, but to this he adds influences from Brazil and Africa in fluid, varied, jazz-inflected compositions that range from the breathy, soulful 'Dzem Kma Sim' or 'Barquinho' to the urgent and rhythmic 'Santa', which is driven on by percussive guitar work. *Boka Kafé* is well worth checking out.

ROBIN DENSELOW

TRACK TO TRY *Dzem Kma Sim*

VARIOUS ARTISTS

Mali Blues: The Film Soundtrack

Gruenrekorder (63 mins)

★★★★★

Fatoumata's return home



This is the soundtrack to a documentary by the German filmmaker Lutz Gregor, which chronicles the return to Mali of Fatoumata Diawara after she had achieved success in Europe. It also examines the country's battered music scene in the aftermath of the attacks on music by Islamic extremists.

There are four songs by Diawara, all featured on her debut album, *Fatou*,

although the version of 'Boloko' heard here is a live recording. Then there are three from that glorious *ngoni* (lute) virtuoso Bassekou Kouyaté, including the rousing 'Desert Nianafing', on which he and his band *Ngoni ba* are joined by the great Afel Bocoum and by Ahmed Ag Kaedi, who further demonstrates his guitar skills on three contributions by Amanar, the desert blues band he leads.

There's more Malian guitar blues from the excellent Samba Touré, and, in contrast, a couple of hip-hop tracks from the energetic Master Soumy. If the film is as good as its soundtrack, it is well worth seeing.

ROBIN DENSELOW

TRACK TO TRY *Desert Nianafing*

Sweet as Broken Dates: Lost Somali Tapes from the Horn of Africa

Ostinato Records (80 mins)

★★★★★

A rich Somali legacy: the tapes that escaped a civil war



Sweet as Broken Dates is a collection of Somali-language pop recorded in Somalia,

Somaliland and Djibouti from the 1960s right up to the 2000s. Somali music has a very distinctive personality. Many of the tracks on the album are based around an interplay of synthesizer and voice, a trad-modern take on the traditional *kaban* (an *oud*-like lute) music. But as with any pop music, it has absorbed what is popular at the time – it's dripping with soul and funk, as well as influences from Ethiopia, the Arabic peninsula and even Bollywood.

The most fascinating selections come courtesy of Radio Hargeisa, which in 1988 managed to safeguard more than 10,000 tapes during the civil war, by sending them into neighbouring countries or burying them in the ground, which might explain the poor sound quality of some of these tracks.

The CD comes with a 32-page booklet featuring several essays and interviews with the artists. It's a great addition to the music. This is a wonderful album for both listening and learning, serving as a jumping-off point for people wanting to start their own journeys into Somali groove. It will be interesting to see if any other compilations come from Radio Hargeisa's amazing haul.

JIM HICKSON

TRACK TO TRY *Xuduud Ma Leh Xubigaan* by Iftiin Band