

## **SALIF KEITA**

### **«M'BEMBA»**

Salif Keita came into the world both cursed and blessed. With each new ordeal, its salvation; with each new obstacle, some inspired ruse or unstinting strength to continue his path. And here lies the enigma. For example, how could he accept being disowned by a father who refused the inevitability of an albino son ? What reply could he give to face the hostility of his own caste when he, a Keita, chose to become a musician ? The domain he was entering was strictly forbidden to the Mandingo nobles to whom he belonged. If living means knowing how to solve paradoxes, then Salif Keita is more alive than any of us. Having black parents, but being born white; bearing both a king's name and the burden of a beggar's fate... those are extremely discordant experiences, capable of either destroying a soul or of making it invincible. Yet with Salif things didn't stop there. This miraculous, wild and solitary survivor also became the most emblematic artist in a whole continent. And today, with the appearance of his new album *M'Bemba*, he's established himself as the artisan of a renaissance in traditional African sounds, even though he's spent the best part of his career elsewhere, in Europe and The United States, in search of his musical salvation. This is his destiny, and it is not a common one.

In the Sixties, when he made his debuts in the Rail Band and the Ambassadeurs, the two most influential orchestras on the local scene in Mali, African music was undergoing the greatest transformation in its entire history. Carried by the inspiration of cultural emancipation, and submitting to the outside attractions of modern trends from America and Europe, the music was changing all the more quickly due to the importing of new instruments – especially amplified guitars – and the new technology capable of recording them. Salif took to this unstable, breathtaking climate like a fish to water. His voice, a baroque, ultra-powerful organ whose muscles he'd developed chasing larks and baboons from the family's maize crops, was already the most magnetic instrument in the country. His thirst for new horizons was insatiable. In addition, he had a taste for meeting new people. His encounter with Kanté Manfila, the guitarist from Guinea, was one of the most profitable. In 1972, it was under Manfila's wing – he was leading the Ambassadeurs du Motel band at the time – that Salif took refuge after leaving the Rail Band, who were residents at the Buffet de la Gare in Bamako. Unlike the Rail Band, whose repertoire was made up mostly of traditional Mandingo songs, the Ambassadeurs flattered all kinds of genres, with a predilection for Cuban music even though they also favoured French and English pop, American soul, Argentinean tango or accordion-waltzes... Salif suckled at all of those breasts. He quickly grew, too quickly in a Mali where he was already beginning to feel cramped. In 1979, still with Manfila, he went into exile in Abidjan – then the hub of West African music – and recorded *Mandjou*, the first Mandingo hit of the modern era. He then went to Washington, where Manfila and Salif produced *Primpin*, a song whose words were as scandalous ('alcohol' and 'drugs' were in the lyrics!) as the sound was revolutionary. It was an absolute smash hit. The renegade became a star, and in 1987 his album *Soro* established the Afro Pop concept. Four years later, *Amen*, with appearances by Joe Zawinul, Wayne Shorter and Carlos Santana, showed how perfectly Salif had become acclimatised in the land of contemporary music's great mammals.

*“My approach to rock, jazz or soul was a necessity. For someone self-taught like me, playing with Carlos Santana or Joe Zawinul meant rapid progress. Today, that's what allows me to play the music of my country with more control, more assurance and depth,”* says Salif, with pragmatism. It's true that, since *Moffou* in 2002, a second career has begun for him. This new record, where he renews acquaintances with his old accomplice Kanté Manfila, also marks the beginning of his association with producer Jean Lamoot; the latter has worked with Noir Désir and Alain Bashung, and his new approach,

linking traditional and modern acoustics, was a determinant factor in the recording's success. Certified gold in France, *Moffou* in fact anticipated the renaissance of classical Mandingo music and its major instruments, like the lute called the *ngoni*, or the *balafon* (an ancestral xylophone) and the percussion instrument called a calabash, all mandatory ingredients in any West African production today. Titles like *Madan* or *Moussolou* also forged a new aesthetic in which the contemporary sound-environment sublimates the original textures, no longer overwhelming them as so often in the past. And yet *Moffou* represented only one step in this achievement; it sketched a return to Salif's roots, and this return is only now put into full effect with *M'Bemba*, the first of all his albums to be recorded in Mali, in the very studio that Salif had built for himself at home in Bamako. It's an important detail when you consider the force with which the light, the colours and the scents of the country can impregnate things. Jean Lamoot is in charge, and there are some of the musicians featured on the previous album, like percussionist Mino Cinélu or guitarist Jean-Louis Solans. Among the most loyal of the faithful, and also on board, are Kanté Manfila, the guitarist Djelly Moussa Kouyaté, the *kamele ngoni* player Harouna Samaké and, last but not least, Ousmane Kouyaté, the legendary guitarist from the Ambassadeurs band at the end of the 70's. A genuine ark of sound, *M'Bemba* provides a change of scenery right from the beginning, with the rare sounds of the *simbi*, a lute played by hunters, on the astonishing *Moriba*. It makes your hair stand up with two "tradi-funk" pieces, *Yambo* and *Dadjani*, the latter entwined around an inflexible loop played on a hurdy-gurdy, the same instrument as that used in the folk-music of Brittany or the Auvergne region in France. Over a spectrum of tones that is broader than on the previous album, nothing is neglected, from the slight notes of the flute to the abrupt, broad roundness of the bass. Three voices join forces on *Laban* to urge the tune on in the same direction, bringing Salif to declare: "*Dance is the difference between Moffou and M'Bemba. And daring.*" *M'Bemba* is the most traditional of these ten new titles, and it is daring because of the summons sent out to the cream of Mali's Griot musicians, among them the *kora* master Toumani Diabaté and *ngoni* player Mama Sissoko. A *M'Bemba* is an 'old one', the grandfather called on – in spirit – by Salif as a witness to the intolerance and lack of generosity shown by a part of traditional Mandingo society – particularly towards Salif Keita. It's hardly surprising to find his foster-sisters Maimouna, Salimata and Diarra Keita involved in this family matter: they decorate the house with shimmering vocal garlands. It is in this way that Salif Keita, the rebel and taboo-breaker, the one cursed for infringing the laws of his caste, has returned to the terrain of his adversaries: tradition. Quite apart from the fact that this is a sumptuous demonstration of the vocal artistry of the Griots, *M'Bemba* is also penetrated throughout with a symbolic power that shakes its very structure without causing it to fold, like the way the sails of a great mast welcome the wind from the open sea. This is an album smitten by liberty, the freedom of an artist who has arrived simultaneously at the maturity of his years and his art; an artist who causes his roots to speak in revisiting the works of his youth, in funk, soul and rock, with wisdom and mastery; or an artist dancing one or two steps with an ex-mistress, Cuban music, on the delicate tune *Tu vas me manquer*. But also an artist who can cause his anger to explode, or pour out tenderness, or dare to admit he is happy, in love or hurt (*Bobo*, *Dery*). Not to mention being more alive than he ever was before. *M'Bemba* is the work of an artist who has been singularly mistreated by life without ever falling into resignation; for thirty-five years he has been striving to make peace with himself, and create unity, to solve his paradoxes: an artist declaring, with the immense sincerity that has always been with him, that this has finally been achieved.