



AMADOU & MARIAM

Welcome to the world of Amadou & Mariam, a sphere that now stretches from the dusty streets of Bamako to touring America with Coldplay and from the timeless traditions of Mali to the main stage at Glastonbury.

Over the last few years big-selling albums such as "Welcome to Mali" and "Dimanche à Bamako" have taken Amadou and Mariam on an epic journey that has made the couple the best-selling - and best-loved - act to come out of Africa this century.

Along the way they have performed with the likes of Damon Albarn, Manu Chao and the Scissor Sisters and have been enthusiastically embraced by Western rock fans. One minute they're being remixed by Theophilus, a 22 year-old streetwise hip-hip kid from Brooklyn. The next minute, Pink Floyd guitar legend David Gilmour is sitting in with them on stage. Then they're playing the Nobel Peace Prize concert in honour of President Barack Obama, and being selected by Matt Groening to play at his edition of the All Tomorrow's Parties Festival, while their early biography 'Away From The Light of Day' with Idrissa Keita will be published in English in the UK this June.

All this has been achieved while remaining true to their roots and without compromising their authenticity. Their unique mix of unforgettable pop melodies and contagious rhythms, driven by Amadou's bluesy electric guitar and the compelling interplay of their two voices may have its roots deeply planted in Africa.

Yet this is music for the world, rather than 'world music'. Music that effortlessly transcends classification or genre and vaults the fickle dictates of fad and fashion. Music that remains as popular across Africa as it has now become in Europe and America.

It's easy to understand why some have dubbed Amadou & Mariam 'the magic couple'. Yet in truth their achievements are down to a combination of craft and graft rather than supernatural charms. All

great musicians work hard to achieve their success. But when you're an African act and don't sing in English, you have to work harder than most - and Amadou & Maram have toured tirelessly to take their music to audiences around the globe for whom African music was previously uncharted territory.

Amadou Bagayoko and Mariam Doumbia both grew up in Mali, then under colonial rule and known as the French Sudan, prior to its independence in 1959. While Mariam grew up in the capital Bamako, Amadou was raised 500 miles away, in the region of Mopti.

By the age of six Mariam had gone blind, a disadvantage that did not prevent her from becoming famous in her community as a singer at weddings and other traditional ceremonies. Amadou also lost his eyesight in childhood but was fascinated by music, first playing percussion and then taking up the guitar.

They met in 1977 while attending the Institute for Young Blind in Bamako (where to this day they play an annual benefit concert). Influenced by the records of Jimi Hendrix and Pink Floyd as well as traditional African music, Amadou attended blind school by day but by night played guitar in the Ambassadeurs du Motel de Bamako, one of West Africa's most legendary bands. He also began working in the institute's own band with Mariam, who cites her influences as including James Brown, Eric Clapton and Pink Floyd alongside the great traditional female *djelis* of Malian song.

Defying the advice of the school authorities who felt their union could never work, they became a couple, both romantically and musically. On leaving the school in 1983, they began working as a duo. "It was just guitar and our two voices at the beginning and we had success like that. We were making a living playing in Bamako and it was working well," Amadou recalls. "But there was no music industry in Mali, no recording studios or producers at that time so we had to go to Abidjan in Cote d'Ivoire to start recording and take us forward to the next stage."

The original cassette releases they recorded in Abidjan have subsequently been remastered and reissued by Because Music on the box set '1990-1995: The Best of the African Years'.

Amadou and Mariam spent five years in Abidjan, using it as a base to tour and expand their fame all over West Africa before they

eventually returned to Bamako. By 1996 their reputation had spread as far as Paris, where they were offered a six month residency in an African restaurant.

In Paris they met Marc-Antoine Moreau, a key figure in their story, who at the time was employed by Polygram (now Universal) and was already a fan, having bought one of Amadou & Mariam's tapes on a visit to Mali.

With their visas about to expire, Amadou & Mariam were forced to return to Bamako. But Moreau promised to find a way to bring them back. By 1997 he had secured them a record deal with Polygram's Emarcy label and, true to his word, brought them back to Europe. After organising a workshop with them at Peter Gabriel's Real World studios, he decided to produce their first album himself and has been guiding their career as manager and producer ever since.

'Sou Ni Tile', their first album recorded outside Africa, appeared in 1998, and after the track *Je Pense A Toi* became a French radio hit, the album went on to sell 100,000. It was followed by two further albums, 'Tje ni Mousso' (1999) and 'Wati' (2002).

At this point enter Manu Chao. Having fallen in love with Amadou & Mariam's music, he enthusiastically joined them on 2005's "Dimanche à Bamako", as producer and collaborator.

Released on Because Music, "Dimanche à Bamako" propelled Amadou & Mariam high into the French charts and became one of the best-selling African albums of all time, winning them both a prestigious Les Victoires de la Musique award (the French equivalent of the Grammys) and two BBC Radio 3 Awards for World Music.

It also presented Amadou & Mariam with fresh opportunities to tour the globe. They went from playing WOMAD to appearing at Glastonbury and from performing in small clubs to selling-out the world's major concert venues and appearing at American festivals such as Coachella and Lollapalooza. They also performed at the opening ceremony of the World Cup in Germany 2006.

"We were expecting something big because Manu is so well-known," Amadou says. "But we were very surprised by how huge it was. After playing together for 25 years, we suddenly become pop

stars. Playing at rock festivals has been a dream come true for me because I've loved rock music all my life."

How to follow such a touchstone album might have been problematic. Instead, the process appeared effortless when *Welcome To Mali* appeared in 2008.

This time there was no Manu Chao but new collaborators Damon Albarn, Somalian rapper K'Naan and Keziah Jones came on board. As Amadou put it at the time of the album's release: "Sharing music and ideas with other musicians and finding new ways to express yourself is the most exciting thing you can do as a musician. "*Welcome To Mali*" is the result of those meetings and opportunities. It continues what we've been doing for a long time, but it's a development, too, in which where we've come from and where we want to go meet."

Since then the story has continued apace. Rave reviews for the album have been followed by some thrilling performances, including appearances with Damon Albarn's Africa Express, during which they jammed with the Magic Numbers and former Smiths guitarist Johnny Marr, and a main stage triumph at Glastonbury 2009.

As both Amadou and Mariam grew up listening to Pink Floyd, a particular thrill was a performance with David Gilmour at a benefit concert for the Crisis housing charity. The former Floyd guitarist played an entire set with them and then reappeared for an impromptu and unrehearsed encore. "Amadou and Mariam are great musicians and it was a privilege to share a stage with them," Gilmour said after the event.

Meanwhile the appeal of their sound across different cultures, continents and ages was shown when the 22 year-old New York-based hip-hop maven Theophilus created a bootleg remix of "Sabali" (written by Albarn for Mariam's voice and a highlight of the *Welcome To Mali* album) and posted it on MySpace. Amadou & Mariam fell in love with what he had done with the track and Theophilus has since played dates with them in London and New York, while his remix has been promoted from unsanctioned bootleg to become Amadou & Mariam's next official single.

"When I first heard Sabali I didn't know what it was," Theophilus says. "But it really connected with me. I believe that everything

happens for a reason and I thought I could add to it and put my mood on the track. We don't speak the same language but the music is all you need to communicate."

July 2009 found Amadou & Mariam supporting Blur in London's Hyde Park before embarking on a tour of the US with stadium-fillers Coldplay. As Blur's Damon Albarn puts it : "I don't think there's ever been a band from Africa with whom people have engaged in quite such a way."