

Looking back to the future

It's been seven years since Fatoumata Diawara released her wide-praised debut album. **Jane Cornwell** catches up with the singer as she launches her long-anticipated follow-up

PHOTOS AÏDA MULUNEH

For her new album, *Fenfo*, Mali-raised singer Fatoumata Diawara went back to the past to get to the future. Literally. The record's cover photo – which shows the singer and guitarist standing on a vast salt lake, her face painted with pointillist dots, her red gown billowing in the wind – was shot in the wilds of Ethiopia. The cradle of civilization, the Motherland, as it were, of the Motherland.

Out there on the Afar Triangle, a vast expanse near the border of Eritrea, the skeleton of one of humanity's oldest ancestors, a young female, was found. And it was here that Diawara filmed the video for the single 'Nterini', a bittersweet song about a young man heading off in search of a better life. 'My love has gone far away and may never come back,' sings Diawara over hypnotic electro-acoustic backing, her voice as crystalline and lovely as it ever was. 'What am I to do?'

Beginning with the stark reminder that one in seven people in the world today are migrants, the video tells the story of this everyman and his dependents between images of Diawara standing at the prow of a blue wooden boat, holding the pole of an undulating red flag, and dancing amid floating sci-fi orbs, Rorschach-style cliffscapes and two large transparent moons. We glimpse two Diawaras, both wearing the same block-colour gown, the same towering Masai headwrap. Ancient and future, hidden and seen... On *Fenfo*, duality rules.

"Migration can be a beautiful and noble thing," Diawara, 36, tells me when we meet in Como, Italy, where she lives with her Italian husband and young son, and where she is premiering *Fenfo* live. "There is so much that is positive about Africa, and I have a lot I want to say about it."

Directed by noted Ethiopian visual artist and photographer Aïda Muluneh, the video is a glorious reminder of what we've been missing since Diawara burst into view in 2011 with her debut album, *Fatou* [reviewed in #63], whose self-penned Bamana-language songs blended rollicking Wassoulou rhythms from southern Mali, her ancestral home, with elements of folk, jazz and pop. Delivered live by a charming 20-something with cowrie-shells and coloured beads in her locks and a mint-green Stratocaster slung across her lithe

frame – a guitar she sometimes removes to perform the flailing *didadi* dance of her region – she duly caused a sensation.

Diawara's backstory was equally compelling. Born in Ivory Coast to Malian parents, she was a wild child who was sent, aged 11, to be disciplined by an actress aunt in Bamako; spotted on set by a director, she embarked on a film career. At 18 she was in Paris, playing the eponymous anti-heroine in the Sophoclean tragedy *Antigone*; back in Mali she blurred art/life boundaries as the lead in Dani Kouyaté's popular 2002 film, *Sia: The Dream of the Python*, a film about a young girl who defies convention. Her national profile soared.

Invited to join the renowned French street theatre company Royal de Luxe, Diawara went against her parents' wishes and did precisely that. Too bad that she'd been promised in marriage to a cousin, and forced to announce on television that she was giving up acting for good. Ever the rebel, Diawara had run away, making it onto a Paris-bound plane in the nick of time, the Bamako police (who'd been told she was being kidnapped) hot on her heels.

On tour around Europe (and in Mexico and Vietnam) she would sing between shows to amuse herself, her voice prompting double takes. Encouraged, she did gigs in Parisian bars and landed a key role in a West Africa-themed musical, impressing the Malian producer Cheikh Tidiane Seck who got her singing backing vocals on (subsequently acclaimed) albums by Dee Dee Bridgewater and Oumou Sangaré, with whom she memorably performed live.

Then came *Fatou*. Now comes *Fenfo*, (which translates as 'Something to Say'). Diawara's lyrics span topics including bans on inter-ethnic marriage, female genital mutilation and domestic violence in Mali and beyond, along with exhortations to take pride in Mande culture, to stay humble, share happiness, show respect. Non-Bamana-speakers might not understand exactly what she's singing about but it's clear that this is a recording that ultimately celebrates Africa while championing a revolution of attitude.

Fenfo's release comes at the end of a seven-year cycle. Since her debut (on World Circuit) Diawara has variously toured the world, appeared in films such as *Mali Blues* and the Grammy-nominated *Timbuktu* and enjoyed wildly successful ▶



collaborations with the likes of Damon Albarn's Africa Express project; the great Cuban pianist Roberto Fonseca (her Montuno label mate); the progressive Moroccan chanteuse Hindi Zahra; and French/West African music project *Lamomali*, brainchild of iconic French singer and multi-instrumentalist Matthieu Chedid, aka M – *Fenfo*'s producer.

She's also become a mother. "I have a different feeling now," she says, applying make-up in a brightly-lit dressing room inside the Teatro Sociale, Como's neo-classical opera house and theatre. Out the door, beyond the fourth wall, an adoring home crowd of fans including a clutch of West Africans, several of whom will end up dancing onstage, are piling into the gilt-and-velvet auditorium. "I have already introduced myself to the world. I am where I want to be. I want to trust my truth and never change who I am." She squares her shoulders. "I want to speak for the modern generation of women who are fighting to exist." That megawatt smile. "I want to take people to Africa, not Africa to people."

It's an outlook shared with Muluneh, a former *Washington Post* photojournalist who espouses self-determination for Africa. Muluneh's Afro-futurist aesthetic helped shaped Diawara's look in *Afar*, a geological depression where the deepest point in Africa reaches 155m below sea level, and where a small team – including four armed security guards – worked during daytime temperatures of up to 48°C.

A wardrobe of sharp colours, geometric patterns, colourful headwraps and a mysterious, glittering veil transformed Diawara into a sci-fi warrior queen worthy of an Octavia Butler novel, complete with Ethiopian-influenced body paint, drawing on inspiration from the decorative traditions of the Dogon people of Mali, whose beliefs in astronomy and the supernatural incorporate visions of a future reconnected with an ancient past.

"It was very hot but I didn't feel pain or get tired or even feel like eating," says Diawara, who spent four days sleeping outside. "Something was charging me. The earth. The ancestors. I had so much energy. I was in my element."

The songs on *Fenfo* underscore Diawara's mix of strength and fragility – her duality – while covering the gamut of African styles from blues, funk and rock to syncopated Afro-pop, and featuring instruments including keyboards and electric guitars, kit drums, the *kamalengoni* harp and African percussion. There are ballads, too; the songs 'Don Do' and 'Mama' (an ode to her parents, with whom she's long since reconciled) have an intimate, less-is-more vibe, courtesy of just Diawara's voice and acoustic guitar and Vincent Segal's expressive cello.

Diawara cherry-picked compositions from the ever-growing collection she keeps on her phone, most recorded on the road, on the fly ("I am always coming up with melodies when I'm on a tour bus or listening to the rhythms of a train"). Then she fleshed them out with lyrics that, for the majority of Bamana-speakers in Mali, could seem direct, to the point of abrupt: "My type of writing is new for many Malians," says Diawara, who in 2013 gathered a group of more than 40 big name African musicians in Bamako (Oumou Sangaré, Toumani Diabaté, Tiken Jah Fakoly) to record 'Mali-Ko', a song demanding peace in insurgent-riven Mali.

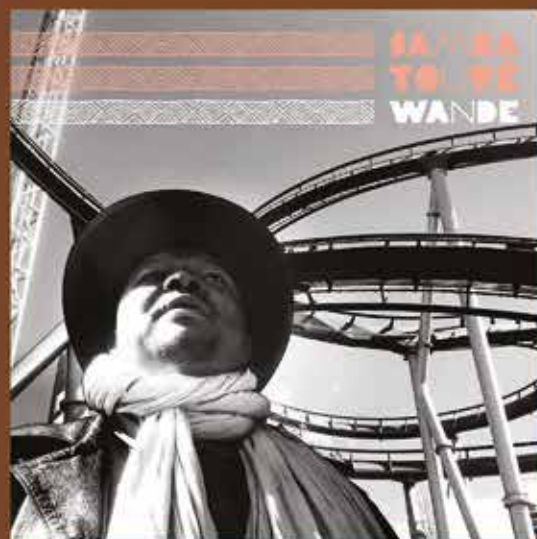
"In a three-minute song you can say many things," she continues. "And you know, music has such an important role in the country. It gives strength, spirituality, guidance; many Malians have lost faith in politics and look to musicians for direction. And music has always brought hope. ▶

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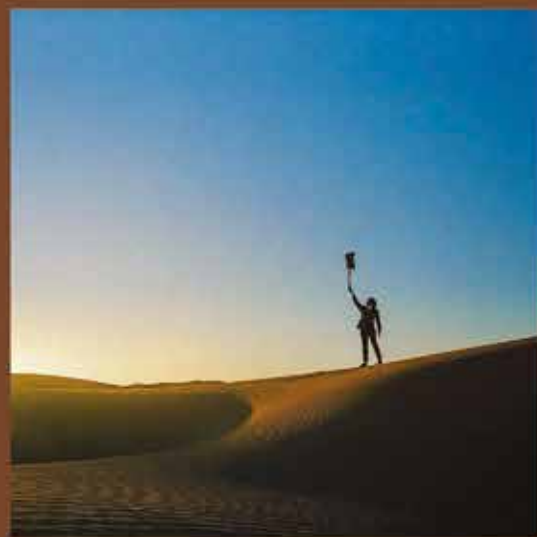




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FATOUMATA DIAWARA



The pictures of Fatou were taken in the Afar Triangle, in the Great Rift Valley in East Africa

“But speech has enormous power in my society; words used thoughtlessly can really hurt. As a result people are very careful about what they say. I suffered a lot from this when I was a child,” – a child whose speaking voice would often crack with emotion, so found it easier to sing – “because I knew we were born with the freedom to say how we feel. I knew I was different. I was in between tradition and modernity and I had a fire inside me that I tried to control.”

“I changed my hair, put red and green beads in it, when no one was doing this. People were like, ‘You are Rasta.’” She waves a hand, dismissively. “But I related to the spirituality of Rastas [the Rastafari, of course, have Haile Selassie, former Emperor of Ethiopia, as their figurehead]. No one supported me. I’ve been building everything myself, since my zero day, to live my truth, to make music, which is everything to me. It is so important for people to be free.” She pauses for a beat or two. “Freedom isn’t just about money, or travel, or singing. Sometimes freedom can just be about putting colour in your hair.”

Fenfo was coming together nicely when Diawara was struck by a feeling that it needed something else, something out of reach: “In everything in this world, you need two elements. So I went into the studio in Barcelona with Matthieu [Chedid] and he helped me a lot, sometimes just by taking things out. He understood the concept we were developing with Aïda [Muluneh], and called his friend Pierre [Juarez], a producer who’d worked on *Lamomali*, who put electronics on a few songs in a way that felt really Afro-futuristic.”

Onstage in Como, surrounded by a band on keyboard, guitars and drums, her feet bare, hair encased in a swathe of sky-blue cloth, Diawara made a triumphant return to the solo spotlight. She began with the ballads, showcasing her voice and considerable guitar skills (“I bought my latest electric guitar at a small shop here and I could see them thinking, ‘Who is this woman?’”), bringing her musicians in on slow-burning blues and driving electro-acoustic excursions, performing her own backing vocals on nearby microphones – looping them in a way that made it seem as if there wasn’t just two Diawaras, but several.

As tensions built, and with everyone in the auditorium up and dancing, Diawara danced too, her headwrap unravelling as she paced the stage during a fiery rendition of ‘Sinnerman’, made famous by Nina Simone, her respect for the jazz icon palpable. The swatch of sky blue became a prop along with other aids, including an ancestral horsehair whip and on the last frenetic track, a football umpire’s whistle, draping it over her head as she tranced out, waving it triumphantly in the air above her.

“We all come from the same blood,” she declared, fist raised, to whoops and cheers as, duality aside, the venue seemed to shimmer with oneness.

“Let us be free to love and be loved.” ♦

- + **ALBUM** *Fenfo* was a Top of the World in #138
- + **DATES** Fatoumata Diawara performs at Cardiff’s Festival of Voice on June 16, Walthamstow Garden Party on July 15 and Hackney Arts Centre on November 20

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