

From a village in Mali to the stages of the world



The Paris-based Fatoumata Diawara is preparing to make her Australian debut at the Sydney Festival in January

Fatoumata Diawara, who mixes old and new styles, is being hailed as a superstar in the making

JANE CORNWELL

AFRICAN music divas don't tend to wear prom dresses, let alone team them with lime-green tights and glittery high-top trainers. Neither do they tend to play electric guitars and jazz, pop and blues riffs, or stop midway through their sets to dance, leap and generally wig out.

Mali's Fatoumata Diawara, however, is as unconventional as she is beautiful and talented. Little wonder she's being hailed as a superstar in the making.

"I like to mix old and new musical styles," says the almond-eyed chanteuse, 29, whose wildly acclaimed debut *Fatou* (World Circuit) has given her a leg-up on international celebrity. "It's not easy. Not many people in my country do both. My traditional Wassoulou music comes naturally to me, but it wasn't until I heard Nina Simone and Ella Fitzgerald, along with the great (Mama Africa) Miriam Makeba, that I understood how to blend that sound with modern styles."

With cowrie shells attached to her long cornrow plaits and layers of netting peeping out from under her strapless black dress, Fatou — these days she just goes by Fatou — is sitting backstage at the Barbican in London. The singer-songwriter has just joined the likes of Blur's Damon Albarn, bass

player Flea from the Red Hot Chili Peppers and legendary Nigerian Afrobeat drummer Tony Allen in a showcase-come-jam session for Albarn's eclectic record label, Honest Jon's. Her statuesque presence and lilting vocals have lent extra cachet to the evening, and to her burgeoning reputation. No matter that Fatou isn't signed to Honest Jon's but to World Circuit, the British label behind the Buena Vista Social Club. Or that Mali in West Africa has long produced extraordinary musical stars, many of whom — Toumani Diabate, Oumou Sangare, Rokia Traore — have previously toured Australia.

With her model good looks and quirky style, her Bambara-language lyrics and leftfield take on contemporary folk and funk, Fatou has an appeal far beyond world music specialists.

Her story is a publicist's dream: she ran away from her family in Bamako after they insisted she give up acting and marry, even sending her to be raised by her actress aunt for 10 years.

There have been TV appearances and sell-out shows; she'll be making her Australian debut at the Sydney Festival in January. These days everyone wants a piece of Fatou. With next-bigthing pressure coming from all

sides, you wouldn't blame the Paris-based artist for tripping over her high-tops now and then. But apart from a visibly nervous performance in a London basement pub earlier this year, at a showcase held exclusively for journalists, Fatou has lived up to the hype. From a head-banging set at WOMAD UK in July to her European support slot with Congolese sensations Staff Benda Bilili (who'll be playing WOMADelaide next March), with each gig she does Fatou only gets better.

"Somebody told me the voice I have is older than I am," she says in her sunny, upbeat way. "They think that maybe it once belonged to my aunt; eventually it will be passed to the next generation. It is a gift. I am lucky. I have to use it."

Fatou set out to be an actress, not a singer. She was a teenaged lead in the ancient Greek drama *Antigone*, and enjoyed various roles with French touring company Royal de Luxe. But when her voice, this gift, was overheard filling dressing rooms of theatres in Europe, Vietnam and Mexico ("Every day I would sing after rehearsal, for myself, because I was homesick"), the director asked her to sing solo during a performance. She did, and between shows she started writing her own songs. Encouraged by her friend Rokia Traore, she taught herself the guitar and began playing Parisian clubs and cafes. Word spread.

The celebrated Malian producer and musician Cheikh Tidiane Seck — who is also at the Barbican with Albarn and co — invited Fatou back to Mali to sing

backing vocals on albums he was producing for the African-American jazz chanteuse Dee Dee Bridgewater (2007's Grammy-winning *Red Earth*) and Malian megastar Oumou Sangare (2009's Grammy-nominated *Seya*). Fatou then toured the world as a singer and dancer with both projects. Some of the songs on *Fatou* — the ones about illegal immigration and war — were written while she was on the road.

"I can't understand war," says

'I find a sweet melody and try to touch people differently'

FATOUMATA DIAWARA
SINGER-SONGWRITER

Fatou with a shrug. "I can't understand why people would want to kill each other. My job is to give love."

She pauses for a beat. "Love, love, love, love," she reiterates, smiling again. While keen not to be considered a protest singer — other songs embrace the pain of adoption and the abhorrent but commonplace Malian practice of female circumcision — she is nonetheless on a mission to bring change. "But my approach is different. There are many women who have tried to change the way things are and had huge problems. So I keep my smile, find a sweet melody, especially if it is a difficult subject, and try to touch people differently."

Like Sangare, Fatou also hails from the lush Wassoulou region of southern Mali, nestled on the border with Guinea, where traditional music is based on ancient hunting rituals and characterised by the jittery yet funky kamelen-goni (or male hunter's harp).

And like Sangare — who sings out about everything from arranged marriage to polygamy — Fatou has women's rights at heart. "Oumou is my reference point. There are many singers in Mali but she is the one who decided to change everything for African women and women everywhere. I want to continue what Oumou started, and be a role model for Malian women."

A pause. "I can't talk about men in depth," she says, "because I am not a man."

Having recently sought rapprochement with her father, Fatou visited the Wassoulou village of her childhood. It was a village of bona fide nobles, she says, where everyone had the same surname: Diawara. Every one of them sang the same way she did, their voices filled with emotion and laughter. "They told me I was their singer," she says, "that I had a responsibility to continue singing until the next generation came along, that I should get my music into every household in the world."

Fatoumata Diawara plays the Idolize Spiegel tent, Parramatta, January 17; Famous Spiegel tent, Sydney, January 20 and 21; Sutherland Entertainment Centre, January 22.

Cape Verde's barefoot diva put African island music on the map

OBITUARY

Cesaria Evora
Singer. Born Mindelo, Cape Verde, August 27, 1941.
Died December 17, age 70.



Cesaria Evora started singing as an orphan girl in bars, and rose to international fame with her soulful versions of songs from her native Cape Verde islands

GETTY IMAGES

CESARIA Evora, who started singing as a teenager in the bay-side bars of Cape Verde in the 1950s and won a Grammy in 2003 after she took her African islands music to stages across the world, has died at age 70.

Evora, known as the "Barefoot Diva" because she always performed without shoes, died in the Baptista de Sousa Hospital in Mindelo, on her native island of Sao Vicente in Cape Verde, said her label, Lusafica.

She sang the traditional music of the Cape Verde Islands off West Africa, a former Portuguese colony. She mostly sang in the creole spoken there, but even audiences who could not understand the lyrics were moved by her stirring renditions, her unpretentious manner and the music's infectious beat.

Her singing style brought comparisons to jazz diva Billie Holiday. "She belongs to the aristocracy of bar singers," *Le Monde* commented in 1991, saying Evora had "a voice to melt the soul".

Global fame came late in life. Her 1988 album *La Diva Aux Pieds Nus* ("The Barefoot Diva"), recorded in France where she first found popularity, launched her international career.

Evora's 1995 album *Cesaria* was released in more than a dozen countries and brought her first Grammy nomination, leading to a world tour and album sales in the

millions. She won a Grammy in the world music category in 2003 for her album *Voz D'Amor*.

Evora, known to her friends as Cize (pronounced see-zeh), was the best-known performer of *morna*, Cape Verde's national music. It is a complex, soulful sound, mixing the influences from the African and seafaring traditions of the 10 volcanic islands.

Evora was born August 27, 1941, and grew up in Mindelo, a port city of 47,000 people on the island of Sao Vicente, where sailors from Europe, the Americas, Africa and Asia mingled in a lively cosmopolitan town with a fabled nightlife.

The local musical style borrowed from those cultures, defying attempts to classify it.

"Our music is a lot of things," Evora told the Associated Press in a 2000 interview at her home. "Some say it's like the blues or jazz."

Others say it's like Brazilian or African music, but no one really knows. Not even the old ones."

Evora was seven years old when her father died, leaving a widow and seven children. At 10, and with her mother unable to make ends meet, she was placed in a local orphanage. "I didn't like it

— I value my freedom," she said. At 16, when Evora was doing piecework as a seamstress, a friend persuaded her to sing in one of the many sailors' taverns in her town, and she was a hit. As her popularity grew, she was rowed out into the bay to sing on anchored ships.

She received no pay, just free drinks. She used to smile when she recalled her fame as a heavy cognac drinker. And she sadly recalled the exact day, December 15, 1994, that she had to give up drinking for her health's sake.

Evora did not think much of her international stardom, and she went back to Mindelo whenever she could. She rebuilt her childhood home, turning it into a 10-bedroom house where friends and family often stayed over, and she always made sure she was home for Christmas.

A heavy smoker for decades, Evora was diagnosed with heart problems in 2005. She suffered strokes in 2008, and in September this year, when she announced she was retiring.

Evora had a son and a daughter by different men, and valued family life, but she never married.

AP

Blanket gave star an overdue hit

OBITUARY

Billie Jo Spears
Singer. Born Beaumont, Texas, January 14, 1937.
Died December 14, aged 74.

BILLIE Jo Spears was one of country music's most distinctive leading ladies.

She enjoyed a string of chart hits in the 1970s, including *Blanket on the Ground*, *What I've Got in Mind* and *Misty Blue*.

With her full-bodied, rich voice and husky, rural twang, Spears represented Nashville's old school at a time when country music's robust traditions were in danger of being swamped by syrupy pop arrangements.

In later years she was eclipsed in the US charts by a new generation of female country singers.

Most of her later albums were made exclusively for the British market and she continued to sell out concert tours there long after her star had waned in the US.

Spears' approach had more in common with an earlier and earthier era when singers such as Loretta Lynn and Bobbie Gentry were country's reigning queens.

Spears was born into a working-class family in 1937 in Beaumont, Texas, and at 13, after having been discovered by songwriter and producer Jack Rhodes, she appeared on the television and radio country show *Louisiana Hayride*.

Her precocious appearance led to her first recording, the cute teen novelty song *Too Old for Toys*, *Too Young for Boys*, written for her by Rhodes and which appeared in 1953 on the Abbott label under the name Billie Jo Moore. It proved something of a false start and it was more than a decade before she was to record again.

After moving to Nashville in search of a contract in 1964, she signed briefly with United Artists before moving to Capitol, which released her first album, *The Voice of Billie Jo Spears*, in 1968.

Her chart breakthrough came the next year with *Mr Walker It's All Over*, which boasted a distinct touch of women's lib, rare in Nashville, where the sentiments of Tammy Wynette's *Stand by Your Man*, released the same year, more closely reflected what country music expected of its women.

But this success proved to be yet another false dawn. Between 1969 and 1971 Spears recorded five more albums for Capitol, all of which failed to make a commercial mark, perhaps because they lacked a distinctive direction.

Covers of hits by other artists such as *Games People Play*, *Harper Valley PTA* and *Ode to Billie Joe* jostled alongside novelty songs, at the cost of obscuring the more original material, some of it written by Rhodes.

The lack of sales and a serious medical problem with her vocal cords resulted in the loss of her contract, but she fought back and after a spell of rehabilitation she signed in 1975 to United Artists.

The next six years were to prove her most fruitful.

Working with Nashville producer Larry Butler, it was a measure of her lowly stock at the time that she recorded *Blanket on the Ground* after it had been turned down by several bigger stars. But both the song and her spirited delivery of it touched a nerve.

First, the lyrics were mildly salacious and yet the track was entirely inoffensive as the couple in the song seeking to revive the passion of their relationship were man and wife. And second, whatever problems Spears had endured with her vocal cords, the treatment had not only worked but left her sounding more confident and distinctive than ever.

A few months shy of her 40th birthday, Nashville's Academy of Country Music named her most promising female vocalist in 1976.

But she fulfilled the promise with a string of further hits including *Sing Me an Old Fashioned Song*, *Misty Blue* and *Never Did Like Whiskey* (1976); *I'm not Easy* and *If You Want Me* (1977); *57 Chevrolet* and *Love Ain't Gonna Wait for Us* (1978). But her 1981 cover of Tammy Wynette's *Your Good Girl's Gonna Go Bad* marked her last appearance in the US country chart. She continued to record and tour in later years, concentrating on Britain.

She had triple bypass surgery in 1993 before she resumed touring and released her last album, *I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry*, in 2005. She was married five times.

THE TIMES

Nuanced works draw on the disciplined imagination

VISUAL ART

Dobell Prize
Art Gallery of NSW,
Sydney. Until February 5.

CHRISTOPHER ALLEN

CONTRARY to what many people believe, one can learn to draw. But it requires a mixture of determination and confidence with what some take to be the incompatible qualities of patience, humility and a willingness to submit to the yoke of practice.

Everyone knows this is true if you want to learn to play a musical instrument, but for some reason few really understand the same principle applies to drawing.

Perhaps it is because we see little children drawing with such charm and spontaneity. We imagine this is an innate gift, and it is true children pass through certain predictable developmental stages in the way they picture the world. But this is in a cultural environment surrounded by images, not only in the public domain, but especially in the books they are given from infancy. Children growing without images would not exhibit the same behaviour.

But in any case children reach a point in later childhood and early adolescence at which the charm-



Anne Judell with her series *Breath*, which won the Dobell Prize

ing and spontaneous drawings disappear and are increasingly replaced with kitsch: they learn formulas for big eyes and copy cartoons and commercial art.

The paradise of childish art is lost; the spontaneity is gone and must be replaced with the discipline of drawing, which means understanding materials and reaching out to give an account of the experiential world.

It isn't easy to get the balance right, as can be seen in any drawing exhibition that brings together a variety of artists, such as the annual Dobell Prize. What makes a good drawing is a tautness, a po-

etic resonance in the relationship between the materials employed and the phenomena represented.

The handling of materials doesn't have to be virtuosic but it has to be responsive. Showy mock technique without substance is worse than mere clumsiness, which is why the abstract drawings tend to look like wallpaper and even the representational ones that are too self-conscious in technique become tiresome.

This is the problem with Godwin Bradbeer's picture, *Man of Six Titles: Man of Glass, The Bachelor of Arts, White Man Dancing, Mister Artistic, Transfixed Man, The*

Wasp 2011. He is talented but his style gets in the way instead of becoming invisible, as it were, in its revelation of the subject. On the other hand, it is easy to be too literal and illustrative, as in Michael Glasheen's *Guringai Country* or even Greg Hansell's pastel drawing *Train Day, Thirlmere*.

One way of being too literal is to rely on photography, a deadly trap for artist; instead of engaging with the world in an imaginative way, you end up as the servile copyist of a mechanical picture.

This is the problem with Joseph Felber's huge and at first sight impressive picture of a mountain, in which rock and snow are rendered in black graphite over white-painted plywood, but of necessity following a photographic map.

Superficially different in form but equally photographic in its foundation, is Pei Pei He's scroll of life in a city street: although composed entirely of roughly horizontal pencil lines, the referent is not the world but a snapshot, and the work is correspondingly inert under its superficial animation.

The other way of being too literal is in the banality of the objects chosen. In *Reservoir*, Berenice Carrington has done a lifesize image of a baby's stroller swathed in mosquito netting. But why? One can ask the same question of John Scurry's *Branch*: what

could possibly induce one to imagine a branch in a plastic bag is a good subject for a drawing?

Are there any drawings that hit the mark? One of the outstanding works is *Buckets of Rain*, Graeme Drendel's figure of a man carrying two pails of water: the subject is everyday and yet odd, while the style is correspondingly matter-of-fact and understated but somehow imbued with presence. Another that is particularly striking is Rachel Ellis's *Evensong*, in which a suburban streetscape is rendered in a deep tonal style adapted from Seurat. In these and a few other cases, there is a sense of life that draws you to look more carefully.

In spite of what I said about uninteresting abstracts, Allan Mitelman's *Untitled* stands out because the work is a collage of share-price tables, balancing conceptual content against pattern.

Anne Judell's winning series, *Breath*, is also essentially abstract, yet more substantial than the others because of the refinement and care of her technique and because the strange forms she evokes hover between the cosmic and biomorphic, not quite planets in formation, not quite underwater creatures like sea anemones. As Guy Warren, this year's judge, observes, "the chosen work demands attention by calling softly" to the viewer.

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What does your car need for Christmas?

If it's not doing anything when you press the brake pedal, it wants you to refill the fluid or fix the brakes. Before you drive anywhere. Drive safely, and have a happy holiday.

Where smart people buy and sell cars.