





The Rose of Bamako

The new voice of Mali, Rokia Koné, teamed up with rock producer Jacknife Lee for an album sure to go down as a classic. **Jane Cornwell** catches up with the pair, who are still yet to meet in person

PHOTOGRAPHY **KAREN PAULINA BISWELL**

“Sometimes, when I’m singing, the music takes me over,” says Rokia Koné, sitting straight-backed at home in Bamako, Mali. “I dive in so deep that I go into a trance. It’s all to do with my love for music.” A smile. “Music is who I am.” Blessed with a voice that uplifts and mesmerises, a voice that, overheard, prompts gasps and double takes, Rokia, 37, came early to song. Her maternal grandmother, Fatoumata Diarra, is a wedding singer, and her aunts and uncles on both sides sing. But it was Rokia’s talent that stopped the people of Dioro – a town on the banks of the Niger River in Ségou region of south-central Mali – in their tracks.

She sang for the community. Aged nine, she headlined a concert for the Red Cross. When the bright lights of Bamako beckoned, she went. After a stint as a backing vocalist for popular singer and guitarist Aliya Coulibaly, a mentor, she went solo, her rise to fame swift, her reputation not without controversy. The city’s grapevine pulsed with gossip about the antics of this tiny *chanteuse* with the butterfly tattooed on her arm, a performer whose charisma and big, bold voice commanded the attention of late night crowds at outdoor clubs such as Douly and Radio Libre. In 2016 she joined the all-female West African super group Les Amazones d’Afrique, kick-starting a series of events so serendipitous they seem divinely orchestrated.

Now comes *BAMANAN*, Rokia’s long-awaited international debut. Released on Real World Records and accompanied by visuals shot in Senegal, the record is a joint project with Jacknife Lee – the Irish producer behind albums for pop and rock music giants, from REM and the Killers to U2 and Taylor Swift. An unlikely pairing, sure, but a creatively fruitful one: *BAMANAN* has the feel of a West African classic. Or at least, of a West African classic, refreshed.

Sung in the Bamana language (called Bamanankan by its speakers), *BAMANAN*’s ten songs see traditional percussion and the ringing West African guitar of Salif Koné

(no relation) blending with Lee’s synths, keyboards and drum programming in ways subtle and innovative. It’s an album made all the more remarkable for the fact that Rokia Koné and Jacknife Lee haven’t ever actually met.

“The only Rokia I needed to know was the Rokia behind the microphone,” says Lee, surrounded by instruments and technical equipment in his fairy light-lit studio in California’s semi-remote Topanga Canyon. It was there that he reworked a clutch of songs recorded by Rokia over several years: chopping, re-arranging and reverse engineering while maintaining the singer’s essence. “Rokia is such an expressive singer. I had a real sense of spirits speaking through her, of a baton being passed.”

“I worked intensively on her music,” he adds, “spending days and nights in the studio. Going through 20 seconds of her music would take me around half an hour.” Isolating a drum part, looping the guitar,

laying down some synth pads. “I’d make sure each song had a signature quality then go purely on instinct.” The pandemic ostensibly kept them apart, but Lee prefers working in isolation. “My biggest breakthroughs happen when the musicians aren’t there. I think Rokia respected me enough to leave me alone.”

Today, at home in Bamako, Rokia is surrounded. Her manager Aba Sangaré is with her, battling to set up a connection on Zoom and switching to WhatsApp instead. Myself, Odhrán Mullan from Real World Records and Bamako-born cultural commentator Wilfred Wiley, who’s translating, are in the UK. Valérie Malot from French agency 3D Family, the woman who both facilitated Rokia’s studio recordings and invited her to join Les Amazones, is in Paris.

For the first half hour all we see is an empty chair, which makes us wonder which Rokia we’re about to get: Mali’s beloved Rose of Bamako? The wild Rokia of yore? Or shy Rokia, overawed by such mighty Les Amazones bandmates as the great *jelimuso* (female *griot*) Kandia Kouyaté? The spooky ▶

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