



Rokia of the *djinn*-led trances? (“If you want a singing career in Mali you need a bit of witchcraft on your side,” she has said.) The famously plain-speaking Rokia, telling it like it is on subjects from alcohol (she admits to a drink to combat stage fright) and Mali’s oh-so-common inter-diva rivalry (“futile and detrimental to Malian music”) to women’s rights (“I call on men to get involved in works that educate and protect women”)?

When Rokia eventually takes her seat she’s reserved, and reassuringly prismatic. Her delay isn’t to do with any diva leanings but her fourth, youngest child, a girl born at the start of the pandemic. She’s placed within reach but out of WhatsApp sight, audibly sucking a dummy; Rokia bends down to attend to her whenever Wiley translates her responses.

One key interview question defies a forthright answer: the meaning behind ‘N’yanyan’, the title of the album’s first single. ‘N’yanyan’ is a well-known ancient song that probably dates back to the 13th century and the beginning of Sunjata Keita’s Malian empire, a *lamban* dance song written in praise of music and evolving with several slightly different variations. “The griots were asked, ‘Where does N’yanyan come from?’ They replied to me, ‘No one knows the origins of N’yanyan,’” sings Rokia in a voice that seems to come from long ago, the ideal conduit for lyrics whose existentialist themes tell of the ephemeral nature of life. ‘N’yanyan, this life is passing. It’s only a moment in time.’

It’s a beautiful song, lovingly rendered by Rokia and accompanied by a video filmed with drones, imagination and several costume changes at Gorée Island Cinema, the mansion house owned by Senegalese filmmaker Joe Gai Ramaka, the video’s director. Rokia had recorded the vocals in a single take in Bamako on August 17 2020, the evening before a coup that triggered a power cut, a curfew and more upheaval for

an already beleaguered Mali. “I don’t know much about politics but like many, I was worried,” she says. “We Malians are used to things changing dramatically. As long as we can find food, I feel okay. And as ‘N’yanyan’ tells us,” she adds sagely, “each difficulty will pass.”

A tribute to the Bamana, the Mande ethnic group particular to southern Mali, *BAMANAN* invokes Rokia’s ancestors on a trilogy of repertoire staples (‘Anw Tile’, ‘Soyi N’galanba’ and ‘Bambougou N’ji’) that praise the kings of Ségou’s past. “‘Bambougou’ has these strange grooves going on, with that extraordinary voice in the middle,” says Lee. Elsewhere among the album’s ten tracks are songs that warn against disrespectful husbands and jealous co-wives, and ‘Mansa Soyari’, composed by Rokia for Les Amazones, namechecks heroines including singers Ramata Diakité and Fanta Damba as it tells Malian herstory. “If you are inspired by somebody” – today Rokia references traditional singer and protofeminist Molobaly Traoré from Macina in the Ségou region – “you must not imitate what they do. You have to do it [in your own style] right, and well.”

The album is a paean to the griots, the hereditary praise singers, quarrel solvers and keepers of the flame. “The griots remind us of our origins,” says Rokia, who was not born a griot (Koné is not a griot surname, unlike Kouyaté), but is a noble who borrows, as is common, from griot techniques. Or if you like, Koné is a griot through dedication and practice – a state of affairs whose origins are explained by late Malian diva Bako Dagnon in Lucy Durán’s award-winning 2016 film *Voice of Tradition*: “There was a need for someone to foster good relations in the community. Nyakoma Doka Kouyaté [an original griot to Sunjata Keita] was chosen but it became too much for him alone... so it was decided that each household should put a person forward to help Nyakoma Doka fulfil his role of making Mande a better place.”

It’s all a far cry from Jackknife Lee’s home studio in Topanga Canyon and the album that is launching Rokia to the world. How this improbable alliance came about is a story with several subplots, one of which finds Valérie Malot upstairs at Radio Libre, the Bamako nightclub owned by Ivorian reggae star Tiken Jah Fakoly, gasping on hearing the voice of the singer who’d arrived onstage below.

“Her show was astounding. It had blues, jazz and almost psychedelic trance,” explains Malot. “When I said I wanted to record her I was told she is wild, unmanageable, mistrustful of Europeans after recording tracks for a French producer then never hearing back. But that voice! I knew we had to try. We integrated Rokia into Les Amazones and began a real professional relationship. We taught her about arriving on time for soundchecks and waking up early; she’d been living in the night, beginning concerts at 1am. We made a couple of European tours and she was great. I went back to Bamako to record an album with an American artist but he cancelled, so I had a studio free.” Rokia laid down several tracks over four days, in 40-plus degree heat. “Rokia’s music is based on improvisation,” Malot continues. “She gives everything when she sings, and in order to do this has to make herself vulnerable. We knew early on that magic had been captured. But then life got in the way.” ▶



