

# Stronger Together



The rise of London eight-piece **Kokoroko** is indicative of the brave new jazz scene – success via tens of millions of streams and a viral video hit has seen this West African highlife and Afrobeat-fuelled jazz collective go on to play live shows at home and abroad and prime them as an unlikely UK supergroup. As their long-delayed debut album, *Could We Be More*, is released, **Jane Cornwell** spoke to trumpeter Sheila Maurice-Gray and percussionist Onome Edgeworth, to uncover the earthy roots of this band's transcendent sound



**R**ave reviews, a loyal fan base, sold out tours of Brazil, India and repeatedly, the UK... Kokoroko have been on a roll for some years now. After bursting into public view in 2018 with *We Out Here*, a project from Brownswood Recordings celebrating the brightest of London's young jazz stars, the female-led Afrobeat eight-piece became poster kids for the so-called 'UK jazz renaissance'. The 23 million YouTube plays given to their languid, improvisatory, West African kora-copying guitar track 'Abusey Junction' didn't hurt either.

"That Sofar Sounds video of 'Abusey Junction' really hit a sweet spot," says percussionist Onobe Edgeworth, who co-founded Kokoroko with trumpet player and visual artist Sheila Maurice-Grey in 2015. "I think because the music is good but crucially, there was the image of three amazing female horn players, which had a massive impact on people."

The 'new London jazz scene' had plenty of tropes: a DIY attitude that saw players creating their own gigs and jams. A boundaries-down aesthetic in which jazz absorbed music of black origin, from Afrobeat to highlife, drill to grime, and a fourth-wall-smashing approach to playing live that saw dancing punters corraling the players and cheering on any solos.

The scene also has an unusual preponderance of women instrumentalists - many of them black British. Alongside the likes of the now-ubiquitous Nubya Garcia, Kokoroko's frontline of alto saxophonist Cassie Kinoshi, trombonist Richie Seivwright and trumpeter/bandleader Sheila Maurice-Grey swiftly became emblems of the 'redressing' of jazz gender bias.

"No one was ready for that. We didn't like being lumped into a jazz scene, or this assumption that we came from nowhere overnight," says Maurice-Grey, now 30, who co-founded Kokoroko with the aim of representing the diaspora, of encouraging young people to honour the music she'd known and loved growing up, the daughter of a Sierra Leonean mother, a father from Guinea-Bissau, and a stepfather from South Africa and Zimbabwe.

"It was such a general term for one small group of people," she continues. "It took away from important things like the fact that jazz has been in the UK for the longest time, and that black British jazz has had its own journey."

Edgeworth nods his agreement. "The first jazz show I went to was to see Courtney Pine. So there was his generation, and the generation before that. The real story was not being told."

Intent on doing their thing, Kokoroko forged ahead (in the Urhobo language of Edgeworth's Nigerian ancestors, 'kokoroko' is a proclamation meaning 'be strong'). They continued developing their intricate, curiously reassuring sound with its roots in West African highlife and Afrobeat - specifically, in the respective oeuvres of legends Ebo Taylor, Pat Thomas and Fela Kuti - and crossovers into the sounds of London and African American blues. A largely instrumental sound made political, social and historical by the intention and narratives within and indeed, the original mission statement 'This is not idle music'.

"For the first two years we really tried to recreate the music of the masters we loved," says Edgeworth, an erstwhile art teacher who met Maurice-Grey when she attended his painting course at the arts organisation his mother ran in Wood Green, north London. "Eventually we realised that everyone we idolised was always innovating, pushing themselves to create something new. So we thought about how we wanted our shows to look and people feel."

"It's like, where are we right now? How do we push that? How do we add something to that idea, that era, by having a bit of our

own lives and our own stories in there?"

They're grateful, they say, for the wild success of the seven-minute-long 'Abusey Junction', which was written by guitarist and former member Oscar Jerome as he and other band members sat on a roof in a compound in Gambia, while musicians played traditional instruments including balafon and kora around them. The track won them a huge fan base and opened doors to the music that followed. It also inspired a whole new generation of girls to pick up an instrument: Tomorrow's Warriors, the award-winning training organisation for young people of colour and girls attended by Maurice-Grey, Seivwright and Kinoshi (all Trinity alumni) was inundated with applications.

In 2019 Kokoroko released their self-titled debut EP that maintained a solid groove throughout tunes both tender and fierce. Then came three singles including 'Baba Ayoola', a tribute to Kinoshi's grandfather that opens with the elastic vocal harmonies of Seivwright, Kinoshi and Maurice-Grey, and 'Carry Me Home', which was written after a conversation with UK Afrobeat legend Dele Sosimi - a keyboardist and singer whose successful Afro-beat/London crossovers inspired Kokoroko from the get-go.

There were nominations, awards and gigs at Glastonbury, on Boiler Room, at Meltdown at the Southbank Centre. Last year they played the BBC Proms. There were line-up changes; guitarist Tobi Adenaike-Johnson took over from Jerome, who left to pursue a solo career. Sometimes the line-up went to 10 or 12 members. Kinoshi juggled leading her Mercury Prize-nominated Seed and working as a composer-in-residence at theatres and arts centres. All this, and rather remarkably, Kokoroko still hadn't released an album. While rumour had it there was one in the bag, a release date was scheduled, withdrawn and repeatedly rescheduled as the Covid pandemic wreaked havoc.

Now, finally, that work is here. On its sleeve is the band's signature artwork by NYC-based Kasmir Jones, aka POETIC, who designed the cover of the EP (continuity is vital here): a black hand thrusts, its five fingers outstretched into a blue, cirrus-strewn sky, from what might be a mountain or a moonscape. Elsewhere, four black hands arranged in compass points reach toward each other, their fingers almost close enough to touch.

*Could We Be More* is the title. Open-ended, up for interpretation (do they mean the band? The individual? The world?) Contained within are 15 tracks that speak to where Kokoroko are coming from, and who Kokoroko are now. Bold, confident compositions that bow to ancestors musical and otherwise, that navigate Afrobeat, highlife, soul, funk and of course, jazz. "Jazz is a massive influence with all our songs," says Maurice-Grey. "Improvisation is vital to what we do. When you look at the roots of jazz, on the continent or the subcontinent, improvisation has been around since the beginning of time."

Jazz found Maurice-Grey as a child. There were music lessons - guitar, keys - in her West African Pentecostal church in south London (the Christian faith informs many players in the ever-maturing young British jazz scene, from Mark Kavuma to Ezra Collective's Femi and TJ Koleoso). She took up trumpet at school, her lessons supplemented by a training stint with South London ensemble Kinetika Bloco, before joining Tomorrow's Warriors in her teens.

"Before Fela Kuti created Afrobeat he studied jazz." In 2020 the Afrobeat pioneer and activist was honoured with a commemorative plaque at the Faculty of Music at Trinity Laban, his (and Maurice-Grey's) alma mater. "Both are as important as

## **Jazz has been in the UK for the longest time, and that black British jazz has had its own journey**

**Sheila Maurice-Gray**