

MANDINGO AMBASSADORS

The Real Sound of Guinea in America

The Mandingo Ambassadors was founded in New York by guitarist Mamady Kouyaté in 2005. A veteran of the great orchestras of the golden age of Guinean dance bands (Kélétigui et ses Tambourini, Balla et ses Balladin, Bembeya Jazz) Mamady is a living library of musical science inherited from his griot ancestors and a half-century of experience as an accomplished arranger, band leader, accompanist and soloist in Guinea. Mamady carried the torch to New York where he steadily and diligently went about re-building this glorious sound on the new continent.

The group's line-up features Mamady Kouyaté on lead guitar, Andy Algire on drums, Nicholas Cudahy on bass, Mamady Kourouma on rhythm guitar, Oran Etkin on tenor sax and clarinet, Eudy Fernandez on trumpet, Sylvain Leroux on alto sax and flute; and Guinean star singer Bebe Camara.

For more than six years, the Mandingo Ambassadors have been anchoring the Wednesday night slot at Barbès, a well-respected Brooklyn venue, as well as performing for thousands at Celebrate Brooklyn!, Lincoln Center, and NJPAC.

Attending a Barbès show, New York Times jazz critic Ben Ratliff was moved to write: "The music of the Mandingo Ambassadors has been structured to make you feel good. It puts dazzling vocal and guitar patterns over a rhythm section that is like a perfect system..."

The group has released two albums: "Radio NYC – Live at WKCR" on Completely Nuts/Mulatta Records, which was selected by by Afropop Worldwide as the year's #4 "Best Africa-in-America" release; and "Tougna" on Engine Studios Records, released in July 2012.



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MUSIC REVIEW | MANDINGO AMBASSADORS

A Band Out of Africa, Playing Live in Brooklyn

By BEN RATLIFF

The music of the Mandingo Ambassadors has been structured to make you feel good. It puts dazzling vocal and guitar patterns over a rhythm section that is like a perfect system: a locked drum groove, much of it played on high-hat cymbal and drum rims; soft bass lines that fall short or start late, or leave gaps in a run of notes; fingerpicked rhythm guitar notes like clear fizz. In the small, square backroom of Barbès on Wednesday — as it will be next Wednesday and for Wednesdays to come — the music sounded loud and light and unfailingly right.

The boss of the band is the lead guitarist Mamady Kouyaté, who got his start among the Guinean dance bands of the 1970s. Many of those groups, transferring traditional Manding folkloric music from ancient instruments like balafon and kora to electric guitars and modern rhythm sections, were state-supported; this was an innovation developed under Sékou Touré, president of the newly independent nation. Here and now, the band is financed mostly by a tip jar. But it is growing its own constituency, both among its audience and its performers.

Its charismatic singer is the young Ismael Kouyaté, also from Guinea, who until recently was performing in “Fela!,” the Off Broadway musical directed by Bill T. Jones; he is two generations younger than the elder Kouyaté. (They both come from the Kouyaté family of griots, the oral historians and praise singers of West African culture.) The band started playing at Barbès in Park Slope, Brooklyn, regularly in July, and until last week Ismael Kouyaté took the subway there after his show in Midtown ended, arriving in time for a second set.

“Fela!” closed on Sunday, and Wednesday was the first time he could perform the entire Barbès gig. Through the cool, midtempo-to-fast songs, he sang in the Mandinka language, as well as bits of French and English. He danced — both alone and with members of the audience — and was constantly improvising, rushing ahead conversationally then forcing out a hoarse, detailed cry, weaving microtonally between notes.

Sometimes some of Ismael Kouyaté’s “Fela!” cast members join the band, and one was Talu Green, sitting out front and playing the djembe drum, accompanying and soloing through the set. But half the band is American: the bassist Nick Cudahy, the drummer Andy Alguire and the saxophonist and clarinetist Oran Etkin, who unspooled scale patterns similar to the vocal and guitar lines.

The friction between the elder Mr. Kouyaté and the rhythm guitarist Mamady Kourouma, their phrases running together and pulling apart, drove the band. Mr. Kouyaté’s leads — at the same volume as everything else he played — were high, trebly phrases, wet with echo, dipping occasionally for a run of authoritative low notes. The rhythm notes, which Mr. Kourouma played with his fingers, popped along steadily. It could have gone on forever, and that was a nice thought.

The Mandingo Ambassadors play Wednesday nights at 10 at Barbès, 376 Ninth Street, at Sixth Avenue, Park Slope, Brooklyn, (347) 422-0248, barbesbrooklyn.com.





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