

Album of the week

Fatoumata Diawara: Maliba (Google)



Google turns ‘record label’ with an inspirational album by one of Mali’s most charismatic singers

With ever greater horrors hitting our screens every day, it feels tasteless even to start to think about the damage to Ukraine’s cultural heritage, let alone speculate on how it may one day be salvaged and restored. Yet experience suggests that the moment for such things could be coming sooner than we imagine. Indeed, who would have thought in 2012 – when Al Qaeda-linked rebels were running amok in the West African state of Mali, butchering all who stood in their way and destroying ancient shrines and monuments – that just a decade on, the saving of one of the country’s great cultural treasures, an ancient library in the fabled city of Timbuktu, would be celebrated in an album of bright and breezy neo-traditional pop sponsored by the makers of the world’s best known internet search engine.

The charismatic Malian singer and actress Fatoumata Diawara becomes the voice and face of Google’s Arts and Culture platform with this digital-only album designed as the soundtrack to “Mali Magic & Timbuktu Manuscripts”, an online showcase for the vast collections of irreplaceable documents preserved in the ancient Saharan metropolis.

If the choice of Mali as the focus for such an ambitious project reflects its standing as one of Africa’s great cultural and historical centres – the Timbuktu manuscripts include medieval translations of Plato and 17th-century treatises on astronomy and the ethics of slavery – there’s nothing remotely

purist or academic in Diawara’s ringing, declamatory tones and jangling, propulsive electric-guitar backing.

The twice Grammy-nominated Diawara’s vocal style is derived from traditional “advice songs” that offer moral counsel to the listener, hence her knowing, slightly sing-song intonation: if it’s possible to hector and bray sublimely gracefully, that’s what she does. Yet there’s an exhilarating modernity to the vocal arrangements on the opener *Ana Ka Bin*, with Diawara’s light, bright tones twisting away from the main melody against a delightful, skittering guitar riff.

One Day, a call to the Malian people to understand the significance of their cultural treasures, with its yearning melody and surging strings, all romantically redolent of epic desert vistas, makes the kind of inspirational appeal to the higher instincts that made Youssou N’Dour and Neneh Cherry’s *Seven Seconds* a huge Afro-crossover hit in the mid-1990s. You’ll get the feel even if you don’t understand a word, though the lack of a catchy English-language chorus – à la *Seven Seconds* – will probably prevent it from seriously denting the charts.

While Diawara’s music is rooted in the hunters’ rhythms of her ancestral Wassoulou region of Mali, she paid her dues as an actress in fringe theatre in France, before turning to singing full-time, and projects herself not as a traditional singer but as a stylish, if idiosyncratic, woman of the world.

Where African music aimed at an international audience has often felt awkward in its collisions of Western

technology and local instrumentation, this album’s mixture of the traditional and the modern feels entirely at ease in its own skin – super-sharp in its production values, yet completely confident in its sense of roots and identity.

The fact that Diawara hails not from Timbuktu, but from the remote south of Mali and lives in France, and that the album was at least partly recorded in Spain, is beside the point. She wants us to embrace the idea of a genuinely global shared heritage – an idea that couldn’t be more relevant at the moment – where we can all celebrate the “tolerant and humanist” Islam that apparently existed in ancient Timbuktu. That this is happening under the aegis of one of the genuine global super powers of our time, a giant tech company, is all part of the package.

Mark Hudson

ALSO OUT

Ego Ella May: ‘Fieldnotes Pt. II’ (Independent)

The Mysterines: ‘Reeling’ (Fiction)

Rex Orange County: ‘Who Cares?’ (RCA)

‘One Day’ has a similar appeal to that huge Afro-crossover hit of the 90s, ‘Seven Seconds’





Celebrating Malian culture: actress and singer-songwriter Fatoumata Diawara

