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Fatoumata Diawara: Maliba – songs inspired by the manuscripts of Timbuktu

The Malian singer’s digital album forms the soundtrack to a Google Arts and Culture project

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Malian singer-songwriter Fatoumata Diawara © AIDA_MULUNEH

David Honigmann MARCH 11 2022

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The city of Timbuktu, in northern Mali, is home to a massive collection of manuscripts, some dating back more than 600 years. During the country’s armed rebellion of 2012, members of the militant Islamist group Ansar Dine seized Timbuktu and began destroying the artefacts on the grounds that they were idolatrous. Residents smuggled many of the treasures out of the city so that they could be hidden and dispersed into private hands. Ansar Dine were driven out in 2013, and since then projects to reconstruct the collections have proceeded. Fatoumata Diawara’s digital album *Maliba* forms the soundtrack to an online presentation of the manuscripts on Google Arts and Culture which tells the story of their preservation.

The Malian singer-songwriter started her solo career in 2011 with the irrepressibly joyous *Fatou*, and has combined music with acting: in Abderrahmane Sissako’s 2014 film *Timbuktu*, set during the 2012 occupation, she embodies the spirit of the city.

Her songs ripple outwards from the manuscripts, celebrating the city, education, the role of women, and national and global unity. “One day”, she sings in English before switching to Bambara, “We will realise/That the manuscripts in our possession/Have great significance.” Kamele ngoni prickles around the edge of the wistful crack in her voice; string glissandi swoop and glide unobtrusively in the background. On the title track, to a swaying hand-clapped rhythm and wah-wah guitar, she pleads “let’s help Mali become a developed country”. The rapper Master Soumy (familiar to Western audiences from the film *Mali Blues*) chimes in: “I owe my humanity and honour to Timbuktu/Mali, Africa, Europe, it belongs to everyone.” Other voices chime in, singing in Tamasheq, the language of the Tuaregs — a musical illustration of Malian unity.



“Kalan”, with a pretty acoustic figure and a deep bassline, defends the importance of education, especially for women. “Let our girls be educated, mother/They may become government ministers/One day they may become doctors . . . One day they may even be presidents.” A light haze of synth lifts the chorus, then a lyrical, contemplative piano solo. “Save It”, with a desert lode that kicks up midway through into a harder, more aggressive groove with curls of strings, deals uncomfortably with the legacy of slavery and questions surrounding which parts of heritage are worth saving. The traditional beat of “Yakandi” is carried on clattering percussion, guitar and basslines woven through polyrhythmically. “I don’t discriminate, we are all the same/The Bambara is black, you are white/Let’s unite and march together.”

★★★★☆

‘Maliba’ is released on Google Arts and Culture

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