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you're within a stone's throw of the boundary line. At Rouses Point, some traffic signs are in French; going west, you'll see directional signs for typical villages like Saint-Chrysostome in Quebec, just three miles distant, where over 90 percent of the population speaks only French. Outside Massena, you can cross to Cornwall in English-speaking Ontario, a small city that's a bustling mix of heavy industry and commerce. And, while you're here (on both sides of the river), listen for the local dialect: "Your mother-in-law is out and about, eh?"

Along this route, too, is the rare opportunity to travel through the St. Regis Mohawk Nation—Akwasne or "The Land Where the Partridge Drums." This is sovereign Native American territory, and you'll be frequently reminded by the hand-painted murals that proclaim both Mohawk identity and independence. Along the way, you can find the busy casino and bingo palace and plenty of places to buy cigarettes and gas, without state sales tax. You should also look for traditional Mohawk culture—lacrosse games at the arena, corn soup and fry bread at local eateries, beadwork, and the elegant sweetgrass baskets, for which local women have made themselves famous at the tribe's cultural center and gift shop.

If you're not in a big hurry, a trip across the top of New York State in any season of the year is time well spent. There's a lot more here than wild country. Along the way, you can catch glimpses of picturesque mountains as old as time itself and sculptural windmills in a scene like futuristic fiction; of grand Victorian mansions from our Golden Age and hardscrabble farmsteads of our struggling present. The North Country is not so much a place as a way of life. We may be off the beaten track, but most of us like it that way. Enjoy it while you're here. ▼

Varick A. Chittenden is a North Country native, a resident of Canton, a folklorist, the founding director of Traditional Arts in Upstate New York (TAUNY), and Professor Emeritus of Humanities at SUNY Canton. Photo: Martha Cooper.



# Abdoulaye "Djoss" Diabaté— The Seed of Mandé Tradition Germinates in the New World

BY SYLVAIN LEROUX

Abdoulaye "Djoss" Diabaté is a Malian musician born to a famous West African griot family. Little brother to the great, world-renowned singer, Kasse Mady, he grew up in the celebrated griot village of Kéla, Mali. His mother Sira Mory\* was a singer who defined her generation. His mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters [In Africa, your father's brother is your father. The same closeness applies to aunts, uncles and cousins.], were, and still are, evolving at the heart of Mandé culture: the cream of the country's instrumentalists, singers, dancers, historians, and storytellers. His extended family reads like a who's who of Mandé music (Mali, Guinea, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Gambia, Guinea Bissau).

Abdoulaye absorbed all these influences and demonstrated outstanding musical abilities at a very early age. In his late teens, he moved to Ivory Coast, as that country offered greater promise of material well being, and established residence in Abidjan where he stayed for the following 20-plus years. There, he founded Super Mandé, a group that established itself as one of the most popular bands in the area. He rubbed shoulders with artists who have since become well known, such as Salif Keita, Mory Kanté, Manfila Kanté, Ousmane Kouyaté, and more. They played weddings, parties, baptisms, and concerts, touring all over the region and neighboring countries. An LP by the group, titled *Wahabia ke-dashi*, was released in the mid-70s, but because the title track criticized some hypocritical marabouts (religious leaders), the album stirred controversy and was banned from airplay, contributing to the stifling of the band's opportunities for greater success.

Eventually, Abdoulaye was noticed by Souleymane Koli, the choreographer and director of the world famous Ballet Koteba,

and of the girl band Les Gos de Koteba, who recruited him to tour with the Ballet as a singer, and with the Gos as a guitarist. For many years, he toured Africa and the world with them.

Meanwhile, he had fallen in love (a love story that rivals Romeo and Juliet—minus the suicides), married, and was head of a growing family. Life in Africa was uncertain, and his situation with the Koteba organization, despite all the touring, did not yield substantial rewards. Therefore, in 1996, he saw an opportunity to try his luck in New York City, and he decided to take it.

The arrival in the City of this great Mandé voice stirred excitement among the African music community—everybody wanted to work with him, have him grace a track on their project, front their band, or just play with him—to be by his side when he opened his mouth and stimulated his vocal cords to produce the amazing sounds that, in this case, we deceptively refer to as singing; his vocal prowess and his personality bursting with spontaneous creativity, inevitably perking up any musical situation, generating excitement and delight.

In a short time, he became a figurehead to the Mandé griot community in the United States, a fact consecrated by his participation in the Smithsonian Folkways release *Badenya: Manden Jaliya in New York City*, the cover of which is graced by our protagonist's beaming, irresistible smile. On that photo, and in person, he bears an uncanny resemblance to the greatest American musician of all times, Louis Armstrong, with whom he also shares the qualities of innovative musical talent, indomitable spirit, and an infectious joyous disposition.

As an immigrant to America, Abdoulaye

has been open to anyone who approached him and wholeheartedly dove into even the most unfamiliar musical situation, yielding some extraordinary music along the way. This has led to collaborations with artists such as Don Byron, Peter Apfelbaum, Mamadou Diabaté, Banning Eyre, Fula Flute, Source, Dallam-Dougou, Sean Noonan, Andy Algire, David Racanelli, and many others.

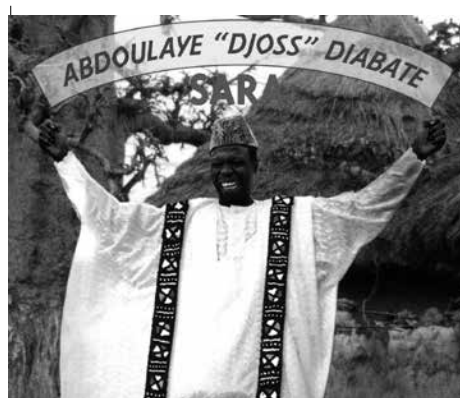
However, being a griot carries important social responsibilities, the highest of which are to tell the truth and inspire elevated thoughts and emotions, and defines one's position in life, musical expression being one facet, albeit an important one, of a complex role. The Mandé word for griot is *jaly*, which means blood. Therefore, the griot is like the blood of the community, uniting it, nurturing it with meaning and remembrance. In an oral culture, the griot bears witness and recognizes people and their deeds for posterity, giving them reality.

In the spirit of carrying on his tradition, Abdoulaye has re-created Super Mandé in America, with whom he has brought traditional music into schools, universities, and

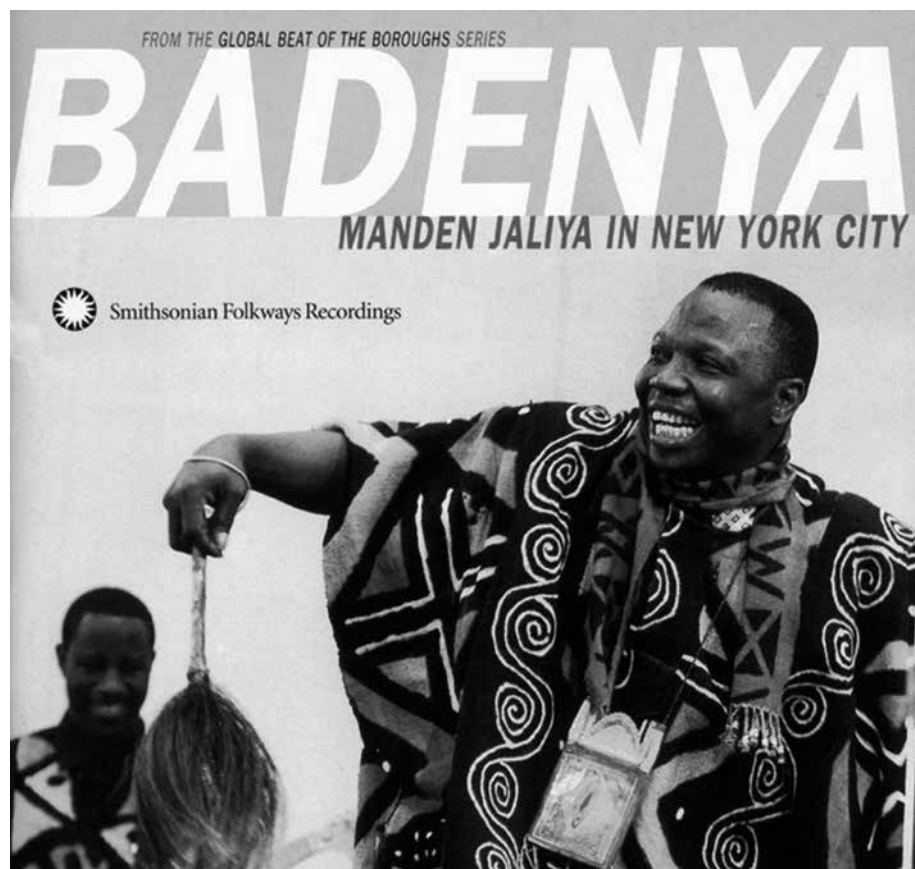
communities across the United States. In his first traditional music release, *SARA* (Completely Nuts/Mulatta Records, CTN-003), Abdoulaye explores the heart of his tradition and his passion for its roots, accompanied by the finest Manden musicians in New York. Eight new tracks present the sound of praise singing, love ballads, and songs of advice and celebration, re-interpreting the tradition for the modern world.

Abdoulaye Diabaté represents, in this author's opinion, as pristine and unadulterated a source of elevated musical expression as presently still remains on this planet. It is a joy and a privilege to experience his artistry so closely.

Abdoulaye's CD, *SARA*, was the February 2012 featured selection in the New York Folklore Society's CD-of-the-Month *Voices in New York* membership program. For more information about Abdoulaye, visit the New York Folklore Society's directory of traditional artists: <http://www.nyfolklore.org/tradarts/music/artist/diabat.html>



**\*Here is a paragraph describing Sira Mory Diabaté's artistry:** Far from having a pretty voice, Sira Mory Diabaté produces a raucous and disturbing sound. Although she was an enviable singer in her youth, this griotte from Kéla was the victim of a spell, which caused her to fall ill and lose her voice. But instead of disappearing from the scene, she became the most feared and the most respected female singer in post-independence Mali. It was to her (or in her masculine guise, Banzoumana) that the national radio entrusted the announcement of grave events: wars, the death of a well-known person. "When you hear her voice, you are afraid," said her contemporaries. But her words are unequalled in terms of their classic purity and depth. In song, she says that even a clever hairdresser is liable to make a mistake when plaiting tresses, but she can tell a story putting each word in its rightful place, so that not a single grain of the truth escapes.



Sylvain Leroux, a French Canadian flutist-saxophonist and composer, is the leader of Source with Abdoulaye Diabaté. Leroux is one of the few outsiders to have mastered the *tambin* (also known as the Fula flute), or the Guinean transverse flute. He has invented and patented a variant of the instrument called the "chromatic tambin" and developed an innovative music education program for Guinea. His debut recording *Quatuor Creole* was released to critical acclaim. Photo by Christopher Drukker.



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