

# COME TOGETHER

**MALI** The coup d'état in March became the unexpected, surreal and dramatic backdrop to the recording of master *ngoni* player Bassekou Kouyaté's latest album. Rose Skelton reports

PHOTOS FRED SHAMBAR & JENS SCHWARTZ UNLESS STATED



SIMON PHIPPS

**Opposite:** Bassekou Kouyaté pictured at home in Mali in November  
**Above:** Bassekou on the Africa Express train in September

In the corner of the bedroom, leaning up in the crook of the wall, is an *ngoni*, small and yellow-skinned. Next door, where we have wheeled the fridge that rattles like a tractor, is a sign for the *ngoni* school that Bassekou Kouyaté hoped to open, but which for now has become our accidental home. Outside, the neighbourhood of Bankoni – a poor, working-class mash of mud roads, communal water pumps, skinny grazing sheep, plastic bags, metal salvage heaps and a giant mosque – buzzes with early morning business. The discussion between music producers, over coffee, baguettes and mangoes perched on an upturned cardboard box, is the same as every other morning: events that happened overnight, events that might happen today. But above all, the recording, and how to carry on.

“I am apolitical,” says Bassekou, Mali’s fêted *ngoni* player, the first man to have formed a band entirely of *ngonis*, with his wife Ami Sacko providing the intense vocals. “I am not a politician, but I have my position. If people need me to play, I come. There’s no problem.”

Despite his claims, Bassekou’s third international release, *Jama Ko*, following on from the Grammy nominated *I Speak Fula* (in 2009), has become, above all else, a political album. There was no escaping it, for any of us, as Mali was turned upside down over night, and with it, Bassekou’s world.

On the first day of the recording in March, while we waited outside Studio Bogolan in Bamako for a power cut to pass, we received a frantic call from the photographer who was trapped inside a bank while soldiers unloaded guns from a taxi outside and started firing into the air. The streets were filled with panic as pedestrians fled. Within a couple of hours, soldiers had overtaken the mouthpiece of the nation: the state TV and radio, ORTM.

By nightfall, as we sat on the blessedly breezy rooftop of Bassekou’s *ngoni* school looking out across the city and over to the hill on which the presidential palace sat, a fierce battle for power was taking place. The air was filled with the sound of gun shots. By morning,

president Amadou Toumani Touré, or ATT as he is known, the man who gave Bassekou the National Order of Mali, took him on tours to sing for other African presidents, advised him and was his friend, was gone.

The next morning we all gathered around the television at Bassekou’s house, his family eerily going about their daily business in the courtyard outside, Ami wafting in to the plush-rugged living room in a cloud of colour and scent, waiting for the Malian pop videos on ORTM to end and for the announcement to run again. Bug-eyed and dressed in khaki, the soldiers sat around a table and one of them read out an announcement. They were in charge, ATT was gone and the constitution was hereby suspended. We were all to stay home until Tuesday, four days from now.

“This was the worst memory I have in my life,” says Bassekou, sadly, of that time. “The music was good, we were in the studio, everything was perfect, and paf! We heard about the coup d’état against someone democratically elected. It’s unbelievable, unbelievable.”

The title-track of *Jama Ko*, meaning a large gathering of people, spells out some of Bassekou’s anger, frustration and sadness at that time. It’s a song that tells people to come together and join the party, no matter what their religion, whether rich or poor. But it’s not a party song. It begins like an arabesque lament, just the simple melody of the *ngoni*, and the gentle reverberation of the *tama* drum. The song builds, the rhythms and *ngonis* strung out along the line of the simple melody, while Ami’s voice calls people determinedly to the gathering.

And then Bassekou’s solo, his fingers ramming into the impossibly small collection of strings, the sound raw and rocky, saturated, distorted with a pedal, intensely mournful yet alive. When he plays, perched on the edge of a chair, his eyes scrunched up, sweat dripping from his neck onto his purple *boubou*, his foot resting on the speaker at his feet, the anguish he felt in those days was turned into an energy that makes these tracks bristle.

“I didn’t know what to do, I had visitors, is everyone OK? Are they going to be able to get out, to get home again? I had all of that in my head. I detest the coup, »





Bassekou recording his new album at Studio Bogolan in Bamako in March

I detest the people who fired guns like that, they've turned this country upside down. That messed everything up a bit for me."

Mali's story is not as simple as 'good guy taken down by bad guys,' and in the months that followed the March 22 coup, as Mali has turned into a state of two parts – the panicked, transitional government in the south, and the north invaded by Islamists, including al-Qaeda linked rebels who want a form of extremist Islam that the rest of Mali doesn't recognise – the story has got even more complex.

ATT, it quickly transpired, was not adored by the masses, and Mali was not the great democracy that the world wanted it to be. Lurking beneath its democratic facade, it was a country stifled by corruption and nepotism, riddled with impunity. When money destined for the army fighting a Touareg rebellion in the north was siphoned off by superiors in the south, the foot soldiers became restless. Mali's fabled democracy crumbled in an afternoon.

Mali's history is one of brave warriors and glorious kingdoms, a place where music and songs celebrate those who bravely fought for their people, their identity, their homeland. Though ATT was known by Malians as 'the Soldier of Democracy' because he had taken power in a military coup but later stepped down before winning again through the ballot, he had failed to defeat the Touareg rebellion in the north.

"When people are confronted by problems, they look into their past," said a Malian friend in the days following the coup. "And democracy is not in there. We had a glorious past with many great empires throughout our history. Malians are very proud people, so a general who cannot ensure the security of the country? This made people feel very uncomfortable. In the end, people support the coup because ATT betrayed the historic memory of Mali."

Bassekou has sung much about these great warriors and kings, and the new album adds to the repertoire, with some songs praising modern-day figures. 'Kele Magni' praises Mustapha Chafi, a friend of Bassekou's and advisor to Burkina Faso president Blaise Compaoré who in 2009 negotiated the release of hostages held by terrorist groups in the Sahara. 'Segu Jajiri' is an upbeat, *zoukous* infused ode to a famous warrior from Segou who always came home with a lot of loot, and who resisted the 19th century warrior Cheikh Oumar Tall as he was spreading his form of Islam across West Africa.

'Sinaly' is a song about another king who stood up to Tall's imposed form of Islam, and Bassekou's punchline – 'everyone was dead' – serves as a reminder to people what can happen when religious intolerance gains ground. "It's the same thing happening now in Mali," says Bassekou of the song, "except that this happened in the south but now we have al-Qaeda in the north. I sang



that song to show people how not to do things."

It highlights the cyclical nature of things and the complexities of Mali's current religious crisis that Bassekou should be praising people who resist the form of Islam he now practises. There is also an irony in a man as peace-loving as Bassekou singing the praises of men who waged their deadly wars. But there is a distinction: "A good warrior should defend his home, his family, never run away or abandon their identity, have a good heart," he says. And then it turns back to politics. "If everyone had been like that, Mali would not have turned out like this. But the Malian military ran away, they were afraid of the rebels. Good warriors would never have done that."

Bassekou is one of the few Malians who still genuinely defends the deposed president. "ATT is my friend and he is still my president." While I am with him, he rings ATT at his place of exile in Dakar, but doesn't get through. ATT supported him in unspoken ways, and Bassekou supported him through song. For Bassekou, that loyalty is unquestioning, the relationship simple.

"I would play in front of African heads of states, and it will show them that we have culture in Mali that everybody loves," says Bassekou, with unbridled excitement. "When ATT went to Dakar, he brought me with him to show Abdoulaye Wade [Senegalese president at that time] that we have a band without any other instruments but ngoni." Bassekou lists the other presidents he has sung for: Niger president Mahamadou Issoufou, former Ivorian rebel leader-turned prime minister Guillaume Soro, Burkina Faso president Blaise Compaoré. The list is long. When I tell him I would like to visit for the festival of *tabaski* (Eid), he says, jokingly, he will ask his friend, the Senegalese prime minister, to send a private jet.

"Singing for people is a job, that's a part of the job," he says. "Someone can have a bad heart but if they hear songs about good people who never betrayed anyone, »

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PHILIP RYALLS

**Left: Bassekou at home with his son Mamadou and Zoumana Tereta**  
**Below: co-producer Howard Bilerman**



JEIS SCHWARTZ

*“You must always give good advice to people, really sing a song which can bring something to people”*

that can make them be good too. You must always give good advice to people, really sing a song which can bring something to people. That’s our work.”

The work for Bassekou continues. While music in the north of Mali is banned and normal cultural life even in Bamako wavers somewhere between stifled and strangled with many live music joints shut down and musicians leaving for neighbouring countries, Bassekou sings for politicians when required. Others, like Timbuktu vocalist Khaira Arby who sings the impassioned ‘Kele Magni’ on the album, meaning ‘War is Bad’, haven’t been able to work since her town fell to the Touareg uprising early in 2012.

As well as a dramatic political change in Bassekou’s world, the album features a new band, including guest vocalists Kasse Mady Diabaté and the extraordinary Zoumana Tereta who appeared on past recordings. Bassekou now plays with his two sons, Madou and Moustafa, and the album used a new co-producer, Canadian musician Howard Bilerman, formerly of indie rock band Arcade Fire.

“The young generation want something new,” says



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Bassekou, who was delighted to play with his sons, as he himself had played with his father. “Maestro Howard,” he quips, pronouncing the name like the Malian girl’s name Awa, “has changed the sound of the ngoni. It really hits you, like the rock sound. It’s good to change things.”

Bassekou’s sons are barely out of their teens, and play with both a deference to their father and their own emerging styles. “I see Moustafa playing ngoni with his bum sticking out of his trousers,” he laughs. “Yes, the sound has changed.”

Despite, or perhaps because of, the struggles of recording an album in a city in lock-down, *Jama Ko* is special. There is a heat in the foothills of these songs that fans of Ngoni ba will recognise from Bassekou’s stage performances. These are no gentle laments or tales of yore and the track ‘Ne Me Fatigue Pas’ is the most telling tale of those days in Bamako. Petrol was scarce and the situation in the north was getting worse; moving around the city at night was worrying as rumours of car-jackings and ATT’s soldiers launching a counter-coup spread. Bassekou, who once had the support of the country’s top man, was now on the wrong side of power. His sleek, two-door, navy blue Mercedes stayed parked at home during those days.

The song begins in a flurry of notes and rhythm and then breaks out like a horse from a corral. Ami’s vocals are angry; Bassekou’s solos are completely untethered. While that upset, anger, distress and worry is palpable in this recording, there’s also a sense of rebellion, a party spirit that cries ‘don’t bother me, let me play my music.’ This is Bassekou’s message to his upturned country, and to the people who had made it happen. **N**

**ALBUM** *Jama Ko* is released on January 28 and will be reviewed in the next issue

**DATES** Bassekou Kouyaté and Ngoni ba are part of Sahara Soul with Tamikrest and Sidi Touré and they play at the Barbican on January 26 and Celtic Connections on January 27. See Gig Guide for details

**VIDEO** See a preview of *Jama Ko* on the Songlines YouTube channel, [www.songlines.co.uk/youtube](http://www.songlines.co.uk/youtube)

**PODCAST** Hear Rose Skelton’s report plus excerpts from the new album on this issue’s podcast