

KORRA HAZE

The *kora* group from Guinea are giving this most traditional of instruments the Jimi Hendrix treatment. Rose Skelton talks to them about their new album

Anyone who's familiar with the delicate tones of the *kora*, the 21-stringed instrument made from a calabash and cow skin, will know that its rippling strings and gentle repetitive rhythms are above all, soothing. But there's a new kind of *kora* sound on the block and it's taken everyone by surprise.

Ba Cissoko are the four-piece *kora* band from Guinea. They've taken all the elements of traditional *kora* music – the praise songs, the rolling rhythms, the honeyed melodies – and applied go-faster stripes. The result is an electrifying, ear-piercing but wholly digestible sound that has made them one of the most talked about groups from the region.

I first saw them at WOMAD in 2004. On the stage was Ba, the leader of the group, playing a *kora* in the normal peaceful way. Beside him was his young cousin Sékou Kouyaté, ripping into his instrument with vivacity, rolling his fingers up and down the strings as he clenched his teeth, the distortion pedals at his feet helping to produce this wild sound. Beside this young maverick stood Kourou Kouyaté, another cousin, thumping away at the bass guitar and at the back of the stage, the lively drummer Ibrahim Bah pounding on an upturned calabash, the beat pulsing through the crowd.

The *kora* is, it seems, no longer just an instrument to be played gently under trees by

West African *griots* as they recount tales of kings now long gone, but an instrument that's moving, changing, adapting, and above all, thriving.

Ba Cissoko's debut album, *Sabolan*, was recorded in a single week so that it manages to retain the raw and confrontational feeling you get from seeing them live. The distorted *kora* sounds, the reggae rhythms, the use of different tunings on the same track, energises and challenges the whole notion of the Mande *kora* tradition – much as Mory Kanté's song 'Yéké Yéké' did when it became an international dance anthem in the late 80s.

"For ages our ancestors have been playing the tradition, the tradition, the tradition. I said, why must I continue with this tradition? It's not bad, but we must try to modernise it, to spread it throughout the whole world," says Ba.

Despite this, Ba is not disrespectful of the musical tradition in which he grew up. He is simply, he says, trying to get the *kora*, in danger of being lost in a world of hip-hop and television, experienced by everybody so that it can flourish in the years to come.

At school, in the mountainous north of Guinea, Ba was only ever interested in playing football. He remembers how he used to feel when he saw his father, a *griot* and *kora* master, playing the music that he was expected to learn and love.

"When I used to see my father playing the *kora*, I would wonder how I'd ever be able to

play it. My father would say 'Ba, you must love the *kora*, you must love the music.' But I just thought, I'll never be able to learn all those strings. But he just said, 'You must love it like you are inside it. But most of all you must be brave.'"

Things changed when his uncle, the famous *kora* player M'Bady Kouyaté, took Ba to his home in Conakry to try to breathe some musical inspiration into him. Ba began to learn the instrument and was eventually gripped by the music of his ancestors when he went to a *kora* school in the Casamance region of Senegal.

Ba's first job playing the *kora* was at the Hotel Camayen in Conakry. The catch was that he had to play covers of songs by people like Phil Collins and Elton John for the European tourists who frequented the hotel.

"My boss gave me a pile of music cassettes and told me to learn how to play them. I listened to the tapes but it's not easy to play those songs on the *kora*! But there you go, I had a contract, so with a guitarist friend we worked out the chords and started to play." Although we haven't yet had the album featuring 'Goodbye Yellow Brick Road' or 'Candle in the Wind', this musical training certainly gave birth to the style that Ba honed for the first album, and developed for a second. *Electric Griot Land* is a more toned-down creation – gone are the wild *kora* riffs that have become the band's trademark – but

it's still ripe with a playful, ambitious sound that once again seeks to challenge people's knowledge of *kora* music.

"On this album," says Ba "there isn't so much electric distortion, but there are a lot of effects. Sékou has found some effects that give a very different feeling. It's much more calm."

Nestling amongst the reggae, the collaborations with Somali rapper K'naan and the R&B voices of female singers Les Nubians, there is a version of the old Mande favourite 'Allah Lake' which is sure to set *griots* and traditionalists bristling.

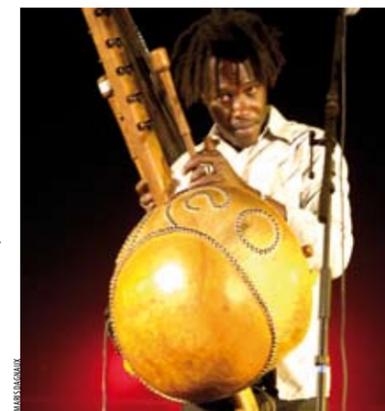
'Allah Lake' is the ABC of the *kora* repertoire, and one of the first songs Ba ever learnt. This version opens with a recording of a rainstorm which moves into a slow, almost dub-reggae sound. But with the wooden xylophone, the *balafon*, maintaining the basic melody throughout the track as would be standard in the traditional version, and Ba's deep voice singing the words, 'It is God, not man, who makes things happen,' – it's a successful meeting of two worlds, traditions walking hand in hand like old friends.

"Allah Lake' was a song I loved ever since I started to learn the *kora*. But there are lots of people who have played 'Allah Lake', so I said, why not do it in my own way, a little more modern. It's the tradition mixed up."

Whereas the first album, *Sabolan*, swung from the raw electric riffs to the distinctly traditional numbers, *Electric Griot Land* takes a more gentle, balanced, ground.

"I said, why not touch on what's going on around the world. So the second track

Ba's first job was to play covers of songs by Phil Collins and Elton John



('Silani') is a bit Gypsy flamenco, then there's 'Africa' and 'On Veut se Marier' ('We want to get married') where we go into a reggae style. Young people in Africa love reggae, so I wanted to give them a little of that," says Ba.

A remarkable track on the latest album is 'Adouna', meaning 'life'. Whereas *Sabolan* seemed like the soundtrack to a city – the noisy, polluted rat race of Guinea's capital, Conakry – much of the second album seems to look north, to the craggy peaks and verdant plateaus of Ba's home, the Fouta Djallon.

'Life', shivers Ba's voice from the hills of his homeland. 'We are from Guinea, let's go back to

the Fouta Djallon'. 'Adouna' is an emotional tribute to the place he holds dear in his heart – smooth background vocals accompanied by a steady reggae beat slipping into heavy base, dreamy *kora* effects and something that sounds like an Indian *tabla*. It is a mature creation, both in style and production, and set to follow *Sabolan* as an album to grab the attention of both audiences and award-givers alike.

Back in Conakry, Ba has opened up a *kora* school for anyone who wants to learn, regardless of ethnicity, sex or age. Even I, a woman, could come there to learn, he says, laughing. It's all part of Ba's mission to modernise, in order to preserve a culture that he holds dear, yet isn't afraid to experiment with. I ask him how his uncle reacted when he first heard the music his nephews were putting out.

"At first he didn't agree with it. He said, 'We are the masters of the *kora* and the *kora* is a traditional instrument and we must play traditional music.' But I said, people must be able to experience not just the *kora*, but jazz and blues through the *kora*. After that my uncle understood. He listened to the music and he encouraged me. Now he is really proud." ●

Electric Griot Land is reviewed on p74

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