

“My life is quite strange... yes,” trails off Fatoumata Diawara, looking quizzically across the airwaves. “I’m only 29 but sometimes I feel like I’m 50. I started to speak out early, I wanted to say something, to express myself through dance. I had so much energy,” she laughs, “I think I had it from birth.”

Fatou, once a vocalist for Mali’s most famous female singer Oumou Sangaré, and the latest signing by World Circuit, and I are ‘meeting’ via webcam, each of us in our respective adoptive homes: Paris (hers) and Dakar (mine). Over a rare, unbroken and crystal clear connection, I have a live feed into her living room. From there this singer, guitarist and favoured actress of West African film-makers, reaches into a difficult life and tells me what it is that fuels her extraordinary voice and soulful music.

“I was born in Ivory Coast,” she says, of Malian parents, and explains that during the few years that she spent there as a child she didn’t sing but instead danced. “I danced all the time, everywhere, I couldn’t hold back, I danced in the street, I was always very excited.” But, she says, when she started refusing to go to school, her father sent her to live with an aunt in Bamako. “He loved me too much,” is the only thing she can say about this event that changed her whole life, her voice tinged with sadness.

It’s taken us a while to get to these facts because Fatou seems determined to talk only of positive things and I’m reluctant to darken the mood. “I don’t want to complain,” she says often, “I prefer to talk about the music because that’s the positive side of things.” But finally we get to her childhood and how it was for her to be sent so far away from her parents at such a young age. “I stopped dancing. But instead of crying, every year of my life which passed, when I couldn’t dance, I sang instead. That’s how my voice came, I needed to express myself somehow.”

Fatou has an extraordinary voice, an alluring mixture of something old and something contemporary. On ‘Alama’, an acoustic track on her debut album *Fatou*, her phrases are long and varied and the melody dances around, as if she’s talking, not singing. Every word has depth, warmth and expression, as if it were meant just for you. She resembles both the great Wassoulou singers of south-west Mali and, charge it up a bit, she could have stepped right off a stage in London or New York.

“Sometimes people think that I am rapping,” she says of her singing style. “It’s because I use the rhythms of my village where we sing a lot with percussion.” The base of her music is a high-energy rhythm called *didadee* which everyone from the Wassoulou region can understand. “It’s our musical base, and it’s very funky,” she says, explaining that Wassoulou music is built on rhythm and underpinned by a funk-driven bassline. Ethnomusicologists believe that this was one possible origin of modern American blues and this explains perhaps how Malian music has become so popular in the West.

But Fatou, despite her years in Paris and her influences of rock, reggae, funk and soul, is very much a woman of Wassoulou. “I can sing in a French style or a bit in English but the music that comes from me when I improvise, when I’m not trying to have an identity, is Wassoulou music. That’s what’s in my heart, that’s what I breathe, it’s my mother, my friend, it is everywhere in me, in my blood.”

Unknown to her father, sending Fatou to stay with her aunt in Bamako was a case of ‘out of the frying pan, into the fire.’ Her aunt was an actress and one of the few female comedians in a country where the role of women is – even today – very much at home. Through her aunt, Fatou got her first cinema role at the age of 14 and after that her screen career took off. She travelled all over Africa working in film and theatre roles, and at 18 she went to Paris to play Antigone on stage. But she still hadn’t seen her parents since the day she left Ivory Coast and this weighed heavily on her. Singing was the only thing that comforted her.

“So that I wouldn’t cry, I would sing to clean my soul. My voice was my first companion,” she says. “Even today, if I don’t have friends around me, when I sing, it feels like I’m communicating with someone next to me. The voice is always something that protected me; when I sang it sparked something positive, it told me, don’t worry, life goes on.”

Fatou’s family wanted her to marry and at the age of 20, forced her to announce she was giving up acting. When a French theatre producer offered her a role in Paris, they refused to give her the permission she needed, and so she ran away, boarding a plane to France and a new life. She spent the next few years travelling the world playing theatre roles, her voice the thing which helped pick her up when she was down. It was only fairly recently that she decided to start singing professionally.

There is one comparison that anyone who’s heard any Malian music will naturally want to make, and as we talk, it’s very hard



“The music that comes from me when I improvise... is Wassoulou music”

MALI Fatoumata Diawara is the latest rising Malian singing star. She chats to Rose Skelton and explains about how she found her voice

PORTRAIT YOURI LENQUETTE

“MY VOICE WAS MY FIRST COMPANION”

for me not to make it too. But Fatou, graceful as ever, saves me by bringing it up herself.

“People say my voice is like Oumou’s [Sangaré] because we speak the same language when we sing, and it’s the same rhythm and tone.” Oumou and Fatou are both from the Wassoulou region but from different villages, and so while they speak the same musical language, there are subtle differences in their singing that only natives of the region can decipher. Through the Malian producer and musician Cheikh Tidiane Seck, Fatou met and worked with Oumou on *Seya*, her last album [a Top of the World review in #58], and toured with her for a year and a half. How was it, I wonder, for two such indomitable spirits and powerful voices to work side by side?

“Oumou knew I was a lead singer because I did a lot of (solo) concerts even when I was working with her, so she knew this was a transition period for me. But we made the most of it, even if we knew that I wouldn’t stay too long with her. We talked a lot, she told me about the path she has to follow as a woman, that it’s not easy being a woman, you have to be very strong to suffer, accept things and take certain decisions. It was a very big experience to work with her.”

Oumou Sangaré is famously one of Mali’s most successful entrepreneurs, involved in the hotel and transport business and

one of Africa’s loudest voices defending women’s rights. It’s easy to see how she and Fatou get along. To become a singer in her own right, Fatou not only had to run away from her family and defy her traditions, but she had to choose to make her way entirely alone, even once she got to Paris.

“My path was different,” she says defiantly, smiling. “I am not a *griotte* [hereditary praise singer] but I decided to be a composer, writer, singer, arranger, do everything myself.” She got fed up with having to depend on men for her compositions; they would tell her they would write the music for her songs, but then she would become their singer. Eventually, she decided to go it alone.

“No man tells me I should do this or do that, I did not want anyone to help me.” Her guitar style is simple but honest, a basic expression of a young woman doing it for herself. Still only 29, composed, brave, determined in person and full of expression behind the microphone, it’s hard not to try and imagine what this woman will become in the future. ●

REVIEW *Fatou* is a Top of the World in this issue – track 7 on the covermount CD

DATE *Fatou* plays at London’s Jazz Café on October 13. See Gig Guide for details

Win
We have 3 copies of Fatou’s debut album to give away. Just answer the following question: Where does Fatou live?
See p7 for Songlines competition rules and address details. Closing date November 11 2011