

It's really strange because I feel music in my soul and it is my way of trying to explain things to my parents. I use it as medicine and to expose myself and share my experience, because I'm not alone in this struggle. There are many ladies who have the same issues. My voice is the only weapon I have to explain everything," says Diawara, whose story at 29 would make a fine prime-time television drama. Born in Côte D'Ivoire to Malian parents, she soon proved to be a strong-willed child when, aged 12, she refused to go to school. After being sent to live with her aunt, an actress, in Bamako, a chain of events was set in motion when she caught the attention of the director of a film featuring her aunt. He gave her her first film role, which then brought her to the attention of others, including the critically acclaimed Malian filmmaker, Cheick Omar Sissoko, who cast her in the lead role of his 1999 film, *'La Genèse'* (Genesis.)

At 14, Diawara was touring Europe as part of a theatre troupe and at 18, was cast in a production of the classic Greek tragedy, *Antigone*. By 2001, she had become a household name in Mali, Guinea, Senegal and Burkina Faso, after playing the lead role in Dani Kouyaté's film *'Sia: The Dream of the Python'*. Ironically, the film chronicles the story of a West African legend, Sia, a young girl who defies tradition. Unknown to Diawara, she was being prepared for what was ahead. Despite her success, her family had others plans – they wanted her to get married, and she was forced to announce on Malian television that she was abandoning her acting career.

In 2002, Jean-Louis Courcoult, director of the French theatre company, Royal de Luxe, offered Diawara a role in his new production. But it was not to be as an unmarried woman is still considered a minor within Malian society and needs the permission of her family, which she did not

get. This was the catalyst that would later help to launch her music career. Not one to conform, Diawara did the unthinkable and ran away from home, boarded a plane to Paris – and has never looked back.

In France, she joined a theatre group and while on tour her voice attracted the interest of the director, who she says told her "Your voice gives me something I cannot explain." He asked her to write a song for her role and when the audience feedback started to filter through, she realised, "There's something here and it's something I have to share. I thought if I have to write and sing for people, I know my life and what it means to be a woman in Mali. To be free and independent, you have to make a decision. I decided I wanted to do everything different to tradition. It all started because I decided I wanted to change something."

Mali has given the world great female artists like Oumou Sangaré and Rokia

Fatoumata Diawara

I'm not to be pitied

Fatoumata Diawara is a multi-talented singer-songwriter, whose voice reveals a rare vulnerability, not to be mistaken for weakness. A non-conformist, she defied tradition and escaped Mali as a teenager when under pressure from her family to get married. Today, Diawara is using her music to expose the cultural prejudices faced by women across Africa and the world. As her self-titled debut album, *'Fatou'*, is released to an international audience, Diawara tells *New African Woman* in an exclusive interview how she does not want anyone to feel sorry for her.

by **Belinda Otas**



PHOTOS: YOURILENQUETTE

“I would like to change the way things are but the first thing I want to do is give love. When I talk to the audience, it’s like a mother, not a president or militant. With love we can change anything”

Traoré, women with whom Diawara has found friendship and inspiration. She is fast making a name alongside her contemporaries, adding her unique musical style to an already rich musical culture, as evident in her songs, which have their roots in Malian tradition without any constraints and a twist of modernity. “My music is not jazz, blues or Afrobeat. When I write songs, my mind is open to the world and it travels to the different places of the world I have been to, from Chile to Vietnam to Latin America. When I talk about women, it’s not only about Malian women. I want to talk to every lady in the world. The root of my music is Wassolou but you can feel a little pop, rock, jazz, Afrobeat and other influences.”

A self-taught guitarist, Diawara counts Nina Simone, Ella Fitzgerald, Jill Scott, Erykah Badu and Miriam Makeba among her influences. Women whose voices tell



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you their stories, she says. “Voice is the only instrument with which you can’t lie. You always have to be true and through the voice, you can meet the soul of somebody. Miriam Makeba, the first time I saw her perform, her energy gave me something very strong. I think she is the first lady in Africa, who started and the world knew her as a woman artist. I know she didn’t have an easy life but she did something and she decided with her voice what her life was going to be like.”

Diawara’s aim is to use her music to highlight tough issues within Malian, African and the global community that affect women. Songs like ‘Bissa’ and ‘Boloko’ from her 12-track debut album, deal with the subjects of arranged/forced/early marriages and female circumcision respectively. In Mali, forced and early marriage is rife and according to the Mali Demographic and Health Survey of 2001, 25% of girls were married by the age of 15, and 65% of 20-24-year-old women surveyed were married by the time they were 18, one

of the highest rates in the world. The same is true of FGM which has a prevalence of 85% among women and girls. “In Mali and other parts of Africa, it’s difficult to explain what you feel about society and issues like FGM or arranged marriage. There are many women who tried to change the way things were and had huge problems. To change female circumcision is impossible. No one talks about it and that’s why I don’t go to Mali many times. If I want to change something, I have to do it differently to the way the ladies who tried and didn’t manage to change anything did it,” explains Diawara. Diawara points out her approach is different. “I thought to myself, if I have to sing about these kinds of subjects, I should keep my smile, find a sweet melody and try to touch people differently, not like war. We must not give up. We have to continue because only women can change things. If other ladies have given





A self-taught guitarist, Fatoumata Diawara has found a unique voice in her songwriting, which touches women everywhere

up, I don't have to give up because I don't live in Mali. I can take power in my work and try again. I try to sing a sweet melody especially when it is a difficult subject and it's already conquering because in Mali, my generation is touched by my music, the feeling and new things I bring to the subjects. They want me to come back."

Though her message is one of change, Diawara is adamant that her music is not a call to protest. "I would like to change the way things are but the first thing I want to do is give love. When I go on stage, I'm not going to say you have to protest. I'm a woman and women have a very different sensibility to men. I have to find a sweet melody and have lots of love, so that when I talk to the audience, it's like a mother, not like a president or militant. My first aim is to always share love. With love we can change anything." Nevertheless, she

is not naïve enough to think that she can do the job of bringing gender equality in Mali and Africa to people's attention alone. "It's not easy. Sometimes you want to give up. Women have got to decide for themselves. Don't wait for your husband or brother. This problem is not just in Mali, it's everywhere. Women have to believe in themselves more. We have to do our work and build our world. No one will do it for us."

Diawara's story separates her from the crowd. It is the fuel of her musical journey and source of inspiration on her breathtaking, deeply moving and hypnotic debut album. For some artists, the need for their story to remain private would be a priority; the case is the reverse for Diawara. Even if being so open could come back and haunt her, she says that is the least of her concerns. She says: "I don't care about that. I believe in what I'm saying because I discovered something in me. This voice is not mine. When I decided to write and compose songs, something

in me changed." She sings in Bambara, her local dialect, which she explains she normally cannot speak. "I can only speak it when I'm singing... Malian people know that because they know my life. When I sing, they can feel something about my life that is not commercial. The subjects I use in my songs is me. I can talk like an old woman when I sing and people forget my age. It's not about being a star."

Diawara stresses she is not to be pitied because of her story either. "That's why on stage I'm really crazy, and I like to dance. Life is beautiful. I only want to share love with people. I hope when people see me on stage, they will forget my story, enjoy the moment and the music. We are talking about now not the past of Fatou. The past is important but the now is more interesting and everybody has a story and not every story is nice. For me love is bigger than everything that has happened." Judging by the rapturous applause she received at London's Royal Albert Hall in June, Fatoumata Diawara is in this for the long run. ■