

# MANDINGO AMBASSADORS

*The Real Sound of Guinea in America*



**T**he Mandingo Ambassadors was founded in New York City by griot-guitarist Mamady Kouyaté in 2005. As a veteran of the great orchestras of the golden age of Guinean dance bands (*Kélétigui et ses Tambourini*, *Balla et ses Balladin*, *Bembeya Jazz*) Mamady is a living library of musical science inherited from his ancestors and from a half-century of experience as an arranger, band leader, accompanist and soloist.

Guinea, on the West African coast, is one of the leading musical centers of the African continent. The first President of the newly independent country, Ahmed Sékou Touré, initiated a program of state-sponsored orchestras and dance companies, including local, regional and national ensembles. The best local talent would move to the regional level and then again to the national level. Artists became State employees. Their responsibilities were to rehearse, record and perform locally, nationally and abroad. Equipment—including instruments, amplifiers, facilities and transportation—was provided by the State. This encouraged an explosion of creativity and the example of Guinea was soon followed by other African governments.

Under Sékou Touré, music and art flourished, fostering national pride and self-confidence. Guinean musicians were encouraged to develop a modern version of the traditional music. They adopted modern instruments such as the electric guitar, electric bass, saxophone, trombone, trumpet, the drum set and keyboard. However, the electric guitar soon became King; griots,—traditional hereditary musicians tracing their lineage back eight centuries—transferred their natural virtuosity to this instrument with particular authority.

After President Sékou Touré's death in 1984, the national orchestra system began to deteriorate. The country, which was previously closed to the West, opened up and new influences filtered in, affecting the public's taste. Music started to change and legendary groups, left to fend for themselves, progressively disbanded with only a few such as *Bembeya Jazz* remaining to carry the torch.

Mamady Kouyaté carried that torch to New York where he steadily and diligently went about rebuilding that glorious sound on the New Continent.

The Mandingo Ambassadors current line-up features Mamady Kouyaté on lead guitar, Andy Algire on drums, Nicholas Cudahy on bass, Mamady Kourouma on rhythm guitar, Faluso Mimy on percussion, Oran Etkin on tenor sax and clarinet, Kevin Louis on trumpet, and Sylvain Leroux on alto sax, flute and Fula flute.



Since the summer of 2008, the group has been anchoring Wednesday nights at *Barbès*, a well-known Brooklyn venue. Attending one of these performances, *New York Times* journalist Ben Ratliff was moved to write: "The music of the Mandingo Ambassadors has been structured to make you feel good. It puts dazzling vocal and guitar patterns over a rhythm section that is like a perfect system..." In July 2009, the group released its debut album "*Radio NYC – Live at WKCR*" on Completely Nuts/Mulatta Records (CTN-004).

# The New York Times

October 10, 2008

MUSIC REVIEW | MANDINGO AMBASSADORS

## A Band Out of Africa, Playing Live in Brooklyn

By BEN RATLIFF

The music of the Mandingo Ambassadors has been structured to make you feel good. It puts dazzling vocal and guitar patterns over a rhythm section that is like a perfect system: a locked drum groove, much of it played on high-hat cymbal and drum rims; soft bass lines that fall short or start late, or leave gaps in a run of notes; fingerpicked rhythm guitar notes like clear fizz. In the small, square backroom of Barbès on Wednesday — as it will be next Wednesday and for Wednesdays to come — the music sounded loud and light and unfailingly right.



The boss of the band is the lead guitarist Mamady Kouyaté, who got his start among the Guinean dance bands of the 1970s. Many of those groups, transferring traditional Manding folkloric music from ancient instruments like balafon and kora to electric guitars and modern rhythm sections, were state-supported; this was an innovation developed under Sékou Touré, president of the newly independent nation. Here and now, the band is financed mostly by a tip jar. But it is growing its own constituency, both among its audience and its performers.

Its charismatic singer is the young Ismael Kouyaté, also from Guinea, who until recently was performing in “Fela!,” the Off Broadway musical directed by Bill T. Jones; he is two generations younger than the elder Kouyaté. (They both come from the Kouyaté family of griots, the oral historians and praise singers of West African culture.) The band started playing at Barbès in Park Slope, Brooklyn, regularly in July, and until last week Ismael Kouyaté took the subway there after his show in Midtown ended, arriving in time for a second set.

“Fela!” closed on Sunday, and Wednesday was the first time he could perform the entire Barbès gig. Through the cool, midtempo-to-fast songs, he sang in the Mandinka language, as well as bits of French and English. He danced — both alone and with members of the audience — and was constantly improvising, rushing ahead conversationally then forcing out a hoarse, detailed cry, weaving microtonally between notes.

Sometimes some of Ismael Kouyaté’s “Fela!” cast members join the band, and one was Talu Green, sitting out front and playing the djembe drum, accompanying and soloing through the set. But half the band is American: the bassist Nick Cudahy, the drummer Andy Alguire and the saxophonist and clarinetist Oran Etkin, who unspooled scale patterns similar to the vocal and guitar lines.

The friction between the elder Mr. Kouyaté and the rhythm guitarist Mamady Kourouma, their phrases running together and pulling apart, drove the band. Mr. Kouyaté’s leads — at the same volume as everything else he played — were high, trebly phrases, wet with echo, dipping occasionally for a run of authoritative low notes. The rhythm notes, which Mr. Kourouma played with his fingers, popped along steadily. It could have gone on forever, and that was a nice thought.

*The Mandingo Ambassadors play Wednesday nights at 10 at Barbès, 376 Ninth Street, at Sixth Avenue, Park Slope, Brooklyn, (347) 422-0248, barbesbrooklyn.com.*





**Mamady Kouyaté** (guitar, leader, arranger) was born to musical royalty; as descendants of Balla Fasseke Kouyaté, Mali Empire founder Soundjata Keita's personal griot in the 13th Century, the Kouyatés are considered the most exalted of griots. Throughout the '70s, '80s, and '90s, Kouyaté worked the scene, leading a regional band for ten years, and subbing for guitarists in national bands. In the late '90s, he helped resurrect the legendary Bembeya Jazz, and played next to guitar hero Sékou Bembeya Diabaté on the group's 2003 comeback album *Bembeya*, and two world tours. Back in Conakry, he labored to revive classic bands using young players, but the callousness of Guinea's politicians angered him. In March 2004, Kouyaté fled a fifth arrest and came to New York where he set about recreating the glorious sound of the Guinean dance bands on the shores of the New World.

**Bébé Camara** is the daughter of Guinea's darling singer Mama Diabaté and multi-instrumentalist Kémoko Kouyaté, who toured with Myriam Makéba among others. At a very young age, Bébé starred as lead singer with the Tropical Djoliba Jazz orchestra in Faranah, her hometown. Impressed with her talent, then President of Guinea Sekou Touré invited her to Conakry to join the "Théâtre National des Enfants" (National children's theater), which won acclaim in the 90's in Belgium, Germany, Bulgaria and France. Bébé was only 8 years old and already a child star. A few years later while traveling to visit her mother in Faranah, Bébé was involved in a car accident. She spent months in the hospital and the accident left one foot permanently impaired but her magical voice remained intact. It was in 1996 that Mamady Kouyaté, then lead guitarist with Guinea's national orchestra "Bembeya Jazz", brought her back to Conakry where she became lead singer of the "Djelidenoun de Guinée" (Griot children of Guinea), a band that toured West Africa and was instrumental in the creation of many other musical groups in the region.



**Andy Algire** (drums) began his musical training as a Percussion Performance Major at the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire. Moving to New York, he studied formally with Guinean master balafonist Abou Sylla. He is the Musical Director of New York based Feraba African Rhythm Tap, and performs with various groups such as Kakande, The Afro-yorkers, Saida Fikri, and others. He has performed locally and internationally with many famous African recording artists such as Sékouba Bambino and Mory Djeli Kouyaté. Andy also leads an African percussion ensemble at Sarah Lawrence College and teaches private and group classes in the New York area and throughout New England.



**Nicholas Cudahy** (bass) was born in New Haven CT. He began teaching himself the guitar at age twelve and by age fourteen was playing in a jazz big band at Yale University. He attended New England conservatory of Music for two years until an injury forced him to withdraw (he would later go on to earn a degree in biology from Tufts University). For ten years he was double bassist for the pop group Combustible Edison which was formed by his older brother Michael. The group toured extensively, appeared on the Conan O'Brien show and composed the soundtrack for the film Four Rooms produced by Quentin Tarantino. After the group disbanded Cudahy moved to Berkeley CA where he studied North Indian classical music with sarodist Ustad Ali Akbar Khan. In 2003 Nick relocated to Brooklyn, NY where he has become an active member of a number groups, playing a wide variety of styles.

**Sam Dickey** (guitar) was born in Indiana and raised in Northern California and West Africa. He grew up on the sounds of his parents' record collection, which included country, soul, motown, jazz, rock, and music from all over Africa. After studying at Berklee College of Music and performing with artists such as Joshua Redman, John Ellis, and Adam Rogers, Sam spent seven months living, working, and studying in Bamako, Mali. While in Bamako, he played and studied with Djelimady Tounkara, Fanta Mady Kouyaté, Mama Sissoko, and Ganda Tounkara. Weekends were spent playing for traditional wedding ceremonies and performing with Toumani Diabaté's Symmetric Orchestra, a band he would later perform with on their U.S. tour upon returning from Mali. While in Bamako, Sam also began playing the djeli n'goni (traditional lute/guitar) and since then has attained a level of technical mastery, flexibility, and rhythmic acuity on the instrument that is unprecedented for a non-African.



**Oran Etkin** (tenor sax, clarinet) has performed/recorded with Jason Marslis, Lionel Loueke, Toumani Diabate, Mike Stern, Killah Priest (of the Wu-Tang Clan) and Wyclif Jean. In June 2009, he released "Kelenia," his debut CD as a leader which received accolades from the New York Times and Boston Globe. All Music Guide declared that it "sets a new standard for world music in the decade of the 2000s." Oran built his foundations studying with George Garzone and Yusef Lateef and received his Masters from Manhattan School of Music, studying with Dave Liebman and Dave Krakauer. He has been playing with West African musicians in the US and Africa since 1997, becoming "schooled" in their traditions. Oran created a new music-education method for 2-6 year olds and is a faculty member of the Brooklyn Conservatory. As NY Times critic Ben Ratliff remarked live on WBGO radio, "He's a great clarinet player. He's got a beautiful sound... and he's an excellent improviser."

**Sylvain Leroux** (alto sax, flute, Fula flute) was born in Montréal, Canada. He studied classical music at the Vincent d'Indy school and jazz privately with Art Roberts and Sayyd Abdul Al-Khabyr. He attended the legendary Creative Music Studio where he discovered World Music participating in workshops led by great artists such as Don Cherry, Steve Lacy, The Art Ensemble of Chicago and Cecil Taylor. He was initiated to African music by percussionist Yaya Diallo and performed with him on the pioneering LP "Nangapè." He traveled to Guinea to study the tambin (or Fula flute) and became one of the rare outsiders to convincingly play this astonishing instrument. Among others, he has recorded with Takadja, Nego Gato, Martino Atangana, Abdoulaye Diabate, Emeline Michel, Nickodemus, and on the 2005 World Music masterpiece "BataMbira." He is the leader of "Fula Flute" and of the African Jazz group "Source." He has released four albums on his label "Completely Nuts Records," including the cult cd "Fula Flute" and the Mandingo Ambassadors' new recording "Radio NYC."



**Foluso Alamide Mimy** (percussion) was born to a musical family in Newark, New Jersey. From age four he participated in many shows with dance companies such as Maimouna Keita, West African Dance, Umoja Dance Co., and more. He graduated with a music major from the Arts High School, Essex County College, and earned a B.A. from William Paterson University. He has performed with the Dallas Black Dance Theater, the African American Dance Ensemble, Alfred Gallman's Dance Theater, and many more. Currently Foluso is a soloist with the Bambara Drumming Society and is co-founder and Musical Director of ChuKatu Cultural Productions. He has been an instructor and role model for inner city African American males, encouraging them to study their culture and history. He teaches privately and performs as a jazz percussionist with the "Baby Legends," the Essex County College Jazz Ensemble and the Inner Village Theatre.

## MANDINGO AMBASSADORS contacts

Sylvain Leroux: 646 549 0658 / fulaflute@earthlink.net  
Andy Algire: 607 351 8641 / andyalgire@gmail.com  
www.mandingoambassadors.com

## Mamady Kouyaté 60s Revival

By Banning Eyre | August, 2006

If you step into a New York club where the Mandingo Ambassadors (Ambassadeurs du Manding) are playing, and close your eyes, you go back in time, and across the Atlantic to Guinea, West Africa, in the 1960s. In the flush of Guinea's independence from France, visionary African dictator Sékou Touré used music to forge a national identity. He funded bands from all over the country, selecting the most talented players through rigorous competitions, and "nationalizing" top bands in state-supported nightclubs in the capital, Conakry. Although the Mandingo Ambassadors consist of four Guineans and four Americans (most of whom have studied music in Guinea), the sound is, as founder and lead guitarist Mamady Kouyaté proudly proclaims, "100-percent Manding" with mellifluous, Latin-tinged rhythms and vocal melodies, and fleet, stinging electric guitar lines drawn from Guinea's centuries-old traditions of Manding music.

Mamady Kouyaté was born to musical royalty. The Manding (or Mande) ruled West Africa in the 13th and 14th centuries, and the Kouyaté family served as the kings' traditional griots (virtuoso musicians and praise historians). Guinea's Kouyatés are famously linked to the wooden-slotted balafon, but by the time Mamady was born in 1956, guitarists were transposing balafon riffs onto guitar.

Throughout the '70s, '80s, and '90s, Kouyaté worked the scene, leading a regional band for ten years, and subbing for guitarists in national bands. In the late '90s, he helped resurrect the legendary Bembeya Jazz, and played next to guitar hero Sékou Bembeya Diabaté on the group's 2003 comeback album *Bembeya*, and two world tours. Back in Conakry, he labored to revive classic bands using young players, but the callousness of Guinea's politicians angered him.

"Musicians had put in 40-year careers for their country," says Kouyaté, "and they couldn't even feed themselves. I said this publicly, and I went to prison four times. They said I was trying to sabotage the government."

In March 2004, Kouyaté fled a fifth arrest and came to New York. He located a young relative, Mohammed Kouyaté — who is also a talented guitarist — and formed the Mandingo Ambassadors. The duo located veteran Guinean singer Émile Benny Soumah — former star of the national band *Balla et ses Balladins* — who despaired of finding musicians to accompany him, and had lived in obscurity in the New York area without performing for ten years.

"When we rehearsed for the first time," says Kouyaté, "Émile spent the whole night crying."

It's not hard to see why. The group is spot-on with percussion, balafon, bass, drums, two vocalists, and two guitars. Kouyaté's sound is pointed and fierce when soloing at spit-fire velocity and smooth and sweet when accompanying. In addition, his picking technique — learned from guitarists back home who were hesitant to use effects because they might break and become impossible to replace — produces varied and evocative tones.

"If you want to blend, you play in the middle of the strings," he says. "If you want to create a slightly different feeling, you move a little up toward the neck. If you want to go crazy, and make the sound that really hits, you move all the way to the bridge."

And when Kouyaté "goes crazy," the glorious sound and spirit of 1960s Guinea lives again.



**MANDINGO AMBASSADORS "Tougna"**

released 24 July 2012

Representing a musical tradition that stretches back hundreds of years Guinean griot Mamady Kouyate plays with a melodic virtuosity that pulls in listeners who love great guitar players.

In the 60s and 70s, following Guinea's independence from France music loving president Ahmed Sekou Toure fostered the development of a modern sound through the institution of a system of local, regional and national orchestras in which the artists were encouraged to create a modern sound based on traditional music.

Recorded August 28-29 2010 in Canaan, NY  
Recorded, mixed and mastered by Steven Walcott

Engine Studio/Completelly Nuts Records





**MANDINGO AMBASSADORS "Radio NYC – Live at WKCR" CTN-004**

Release date: July 16, 2009

**The great sound of Guinean dance bands is reborn in America**

Recorded live at the studios of the legendary Columbia University radio station WKCR, oldest FM station in the World, *Radio NYC* has an immediate and compelling feel that harks back to an era of live broadcasts. The music feels as though we were listening to a local dancehall/bar performance in Conakry, Guinea. This is a group that projects its vibrancy live and it translates completely on to this CD.

The Mandingo Ambassadors includes three *griots*: band leader and veteran guitarist Mamady "Djelike" Kouyaté, the charismatic young vocalist/dancer Ismael "Bon Fils" Kouyaté, and journeyman rhythm guitarist Mamady Kourouma. Also included are some of the best talent on the New York City African scene: drummer Andy Algire, bassist Nicholas Cudahy, wind players Oran Etkin\* on tenor sax and clarinet, and Sylvain Leroux on alto sax, flute, and Fula flute.

The group has been anchoring Wednesday nights at Barbès, a well-known Brooklyn venue. Attending one of these shows, New York Times journalist Ben Ratliff was moved to write: "*The music of the Mandingo Ambassadors has been structured to make you feel good. It puts dazzling vocal and guitar patterns over a rhythm section that is like a perfect system... It could have gone on forever, and that was a nice thought.*" (New York Times, October 10, 2008).

\* Oran Etkin appears courtesy of Motema Records

Mulatta/Completely Nuts Records

For further information, please contact:

Sylvain Leroux, Completely Nuts Records

[fulaflute@earthlink.net](mailto:fulaflute@earthlink.net)

(212) 505-2711

(646) 549-0658





Photo by Banning Eyre

**Africa Day  
at Celebrate Brooklyn!**  
**Prospect Park Bandshell: July 18, 2009**  
*by Banning Eyre (Afropop.org)*

[...] Next came New York's own Mandingo Ambassadors. This band, headed by Guinean music veteran and master guitarist Mamady Kouyaté, plays weekly at Barbès, not far from Afropop's office. But as many times as I've swooned to their classic, Conakry dance band sound in that cozy confine, I was not prepared for the "big stage" rollout we got at Celebrate Brooklyn. The lineup was enhanced with extra percussion, a dancer, and Abou Sylla on balafon. It almost didn't matter that the band's sterling rhythm guitarist was apparently lost and never made it to the gig (though Mamady Kourouma was missed). This act filled the stage and brought the crowd to the brink of ecstasy with their rich, hypnotic grooves, nifty arrangements, and crescendos of explosive dancing. Front man Ismael Kouyaté has a smile and a voice to warm the coldest soul, and Mamady Kouyaté is as thrilling an African guitarist as you will find in this country today. This performance marked a watershed for one of New York's most unique and talented "retro" Afropop acts. [...]