

MORY KANTE

Biography

Mory Kanté is a legend—a traditional West African musician who rose to regional stardom in the '70s, rocked the world pop charts from his adopted home in Paris in the '80s, rode the wave of globalized African music in the '90s, and returned home to his native Guinea in the 2000s to become a force for economic development and an inspirational voice for a new generation of Africans. Optimism and inspiration are themes that pervade the songs on Kanté's last album, *La Guinéenne*, his eleventh. This is both a love song to Africa, and Guinea, and a treasure chest of hard-nosed advice about trust, hard work, gratitude, and the importance of maintaining traditions in the face of modernity.

Kanté's wise counsel is rooted in years of travel and service as an advocate for human progress—supporting UN Food and Agriculture Organization initiatives (most recently, the 1 Billion Hungry campaign), UNESCO and other programs aimed at aiding refugees, saving threatened forests, and seeking to end the practice of female genital mutilation. *La Guinéenne*'s title track marks a first in Kanté's large repertoire—a full-throated praise song to the women of the world, whose sacrifice, dedication, and centrality to human progress is too often met with oppression and neglect. *La Guinéenne* is also a musical *tour de force* from a pioneer whose work has helped define the musical language of post-independence Africa, and who remains one of the most forceful bandleaders and compelling vocalists in African music today.

Kanté was born in 1950 in the village of Albadariya in the region of Kissidougou, Guinea. "To know me," he once said, "you have to go to the authenticity of my history. I am a griot, the son of a griot, from the Mande family." Kanté is talking about his inherited status as a *griot*—or *djeli*—a kind of musical historian whose family ties go back to the earliest days of the Mande Empire, which dominated political and cultural life in West Africa beginning in the 13th century. "Djeli is the blood," says Kanté, "the core of a human." Kanté gets his djeli blood from both sides of his family; his father (El Hadj Djelifode) was a Kante, and his mother (Fatouma) a Kamisoko, both revered griot clans with origins in Mali. Kanté recalled, "I grew up between these two families, and received an extraordinary experience in music, and in oral history. Then I went to a white school and also Koranic school. So I had three schools as a young man: griot, Koranic, and white."

After Guinea's independence in 1958, Kanté's father wrote motivational songs for the new nation, and won medals for them. As young Mory picked out his first songs on *balafon* and later guitar, he knew that he was modeling something more than musical excellence—he had an ancestral obligation to use his artistic skills to uplift society. Despite his early signs of exceptional talent, Kanté never got a big head—after all, he was among the youngest of 38 kids! He moved to Bamako, Mali, at age 15 to continue his studies, and soon found himself playing in a neighborhood band called The Apollos, a group that mixed traditional instruments like the balafon and *ngoni* (a spike lute) with Western ones. "African music is what?" asks Kanté, looking back. "It is to put traditional instruments and modern instruments together. That is the identity of African music. It is now joined with jazz, Afro-Cuban, Caribbean, Middle Eastern, and Maghreb. The mixture of all this, with jazz and pop especially—that is where our identity lies."

Soon Kanté began his celebrated tenure in the Rail Band Buffet De La Gare of Bamako, trailblazers in the blending of African tradition and Western style. Recruited in 1971, Kanté shared the stage with the likes of Salif Keita and master guitarist Djelimady Tounkara. Over the years, he contributed as a balafonist, guitarist, drummer, singer... "I did everything but play horns. I was a polyvalent musician." During these years, he also learned to play the 21-string Mande harp, the *kora*, under the guidance of master griot Batrou Sékou Kouyaté in Bamako. Kanté proved a natural on the kora, and he still plays the 80-year-old instrument that Batrou Sékou gave to him. Kanté would later become the first in a long stream of African artists to electrify the kora for use in a modern band. Scandalous to some at the time, this innovation would ultimately uplift the instrument's international profile, and even inspire the naming of an influential set of awards for excellence in African music. No surprise, Kanté himself became one of the first artists to win a Kora Award, a distinction he adds to having won a number of French awards, including Maracas D'Or and Victoire de La Music, three times.

Kanté broke off from the Rail Band in the late '70s and pursued a solo career in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. He began with a traditional ensemble and built from there, taking more and more inspiration from the popular dance music of the day. By the time he moved to Paris in the early '80s, he was on his way to creating a visionary new sound. His watershed moment came with the song "Yeke Yeke," which adapts a celebratory village dance with a pounding beat, state-of-the-art dance pop production, a full-force brass section, ripping electric kora riffs, and Kanté's own hurricane-force, razor-sharp vocal atop it all.

Albums like *A Paris* and *10 Kola Nuts* burnished Kanté's reputation as an African trail blazer, but it was *Akwaba Beach* in 1987 that blew the roof off. Its fast, electric version of "Yeke Yeke" topped European pop charts, and made the Billboard charts in the US. This song remains Kanté's calling card to the world. Twenty-four years later, at the 2011 Mawazine Festival in Rabat, Morocco, a crowd of some 40,000 North African fans sang it along with him in a fit of ecstasy. By that time, Kanté had filled out his Paris phase with five more albums, including an elegant invocation of his traditional, acoustic roots, *Sabou*, in 2004.

La Guinéenne marks Kanté's return to his trademark, big band sound. It also marks his return to Guinea. Kanté now operates Nongo Village, a cultural complex combining a recording studio, hotel, restaurant, nightclub, and performance venue, all breathing new life into the Conakry neighborhood that bears his name, Morykantea. Kanté recorded the original tracks for *La Guinéenne* in Conakry, at a moment of reinvention in Guinea, following a period of deep political turmoil. Kanté's new presence as an entrepreneur in Guinea represents a vote of confidence in his motherland, and that spirit lies at the heart of the new work. Kanté then took the tracks to Paris, where he worked closely with producer Philippe Avril and a 5-piece brass section

from the north of Norway (*brass section, courtesy of Arts Festival of North Norway and NRK*) - compatriots from Kanté's recent tour of the Arctic - to complete the album. The result is a genuinely bi-cultural creation, rooted in authentic West African folklore, and gleaming with the polish and precision of top-flight contemporary production.

The album's 10 songs offer something more—sage advice and grooves to rally the spirit. With 27 musicians participating, the opener "Yarabini (My Family)" delivers a brassy juggernaut of melody and rhythm, and a paternal embrace of Guinean youth. The balafon-driven "Tetekou" also speaks to youth, celebrating the dances surrounding courtship and marriage with the message that the old traditions still apply today. On the sultry, Latin-tinged "Sikaa," Kanté advises that one should always investigate doubts. Whether in marriage or business, eliminate all doubt before entering into partnerships. "You can't choose your brother," says Kanté, "but you can choose your spouse or business partner." "Sarantan" features a characteristic sound of Guinea—a blend of Fulani flute and Mande balafon in a swirl of dance pop bliss. But the joyful groove harbors a stern warning against dishonest and conniving people, found in all societies at all times. "Nodiche" offers a similar warning, this time specifically against men who manipulate and abuse women.

Women are paramount in these songs. The title track, "La Guineéne," is an august celebration of "the mothers of humanity." Kanté sings that the women of the world "feed us, raise us, work for us, nurture us, and educate us." His expression of thanks is eloquent and heartfelt, and right on point at a time when the long-sidelined concerns of women are becoming an increasingly prominent feature in African political discourse. Kanté also expresses his thanks to the nation of Mali, where he began his career and learned so much in his youth. "Malibala" is a reggae song, set in the pentatonic mode of Mali's Bambara people, and it is filled with gratitude for everyone from Malian presidents and musicians to ordinary men and women. "I will keep this memory until I die," says Kanté of the song.

Kanté's youthful sojourn in Mali became the opportunity that changed his life. Within the blustery funk of another new song "Bedoke," Kanté advises African youth to be on the lookout for such opportunities in their own lives. "Everyone has one chance to succeed in his career. You have to be ready," says Kanté, touting education, humility, hard work, and clear communication as the best ways to prepare. *La Guinéenne* ends with celebration. The song "Oh Oh Oh" is based on a traditional Guinean song, but its feisty beat and production, and the incorporation of verses in French and Spanish, underscore the universal message that lies at the heart of Mory Kanté's consistent artistic statement: modern African music, and life, must start with tradition, and then embrace the whole wide world. It's a message this singular artist has lived every day of his extraordinary life.

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