

ROKIA TRAORE'

With her first two albums, Rokia Traoré established herself as West Africa's most exciting and precocious new talent. Her third album, *Bowmboï*, breathtakingly transcends all her previous achievements as she strikes a perfect poise between the roots of traditional African music and her own thoroughly modern outlook on the world. *Bowmboï* is characterised by a bold and cliché-free approach that will confound those looking for easy categories. Much of *Bowmboï* was recorded in Mali on traditional instruments. And yet it is not a traditional album. Rokia also travelled to San Francisco to record two tracks with the world-class strings of the Kronos Quartet. And yet *Bowmboï* is not a fusion album.

"I love and respect traditional music," Rokia explains. "There are many musicians who play with a lot of talent but it's more interesting for me to listen to them rather than trying to do the same without their training. Yes, I'm using traditional instruments. But I'm giving them a new expression and writing modern songs that have an entirely contemporary appeal." As for fusion, she's not even entirely sure what the word means in today's global village. "If I'd been born 100 years ago, I wouldn't have known American or European music," she reasons. "But the world we live in today means you pick up on all these other sounds and they're now part of me. I make music as someone who has listened to jazz, classical, rock and pop - everyone from Louis Armstrong to Serge Gainsbourg, as well as to the African griots." Rokia Traoré's rise through the world music ranks from promising newcomer to fully-fledged star has been a meteoric one. Born into a well-educated Malian family, her father was a diplomat. That meant postings abroad, so that early on Rokia was able to absorb different cultures. She got to see different parts of the world from a young age including the US, the Middle East and Europe.

The Bamana (Bambara) ethnic group from which she comes does not impose the same strict restriction on singing in public that some other groups practise, and although she's not an hereditary griotte, she decided that singing was something she was interested in pursuing. She was immersed in a rich and varied musical environment getting enjoyment from her father's record collection. While at high school she danced and joined various bands. Later she appeared on Malian TV, performing her first compositions with just voice and her guitar.

She did not make the decision to become a professional singer until 1996, at the age of 22. The following year, she won the Radio France Internationale prize as 'African discovery of the year'. Her revelatory debut album, *Mouneïssa*, appeared in 1998, to widespread acclaim. The follow-up, *Wanita*, released in 2000, was even better and was voted album of the year in the fRoots annual poll. She reinforced the good impression with a spectacular appearance at WOMAD that summer that stole the weekend. Now three years later she's raised the bar again with *Bowmboï*. Co-produced by Rokia and Thomas Weill, many of her now familiar trademarks are in place, such as the innovative blending of instruments not usually heard together in African music, notably the *ngoni* and *balaba* (a large *balafon* from the Beledougou region, her ancestral home). But *Bowmboï* is also a record that breaks new ground far beyond the stereotypes with which African music is often still branded in the west. There's a strength and confidence to Rokia's voice that reflects the richness of both her culture and her recent experience. "Between the second album and this record, I took singing lessons and a music theory class. I studied vocal techniques and that's definitely given my singing more confidence," she says. "But the spirit you

hear in the music is not about technique or what I do on the record. It's because of what I have lived through."

Then there are the collaborations with the Kronos Quartet on the tracks Manian and Bowmboï. "People ask me what the Kronos added to the music. But it really didn't work like that," Rokia explains. "We created something completely different together. It was a complete meeting of minds. It's their music as much as mine, and it's unique. It's definitely not fusion."

Yet despite the sophistication, there's still a timeless simplicity to Rokia's music. "After the second album, "I was disillusioned with the music industry," she confesses. "Everywhere you look there are artists being produced and arranged by their labels to try and fit some commercial demand. I wanted to get back to the spirit I had before I was a professional musician - humility, tolerance and simplicity. Those are the underlying themes. I wanted to stay simple and stay moral and not believe my own hype." All of the instruments and the guest vocals of legendary Malian singer Ousmane Sacko were recorded in Bamako, although her own vocals were added in Paris. "Musicians are proud to go abroad and record. I was happy to do the opposite," she says. "I wanted to show you can record an international album in Mali and bring some work to the people back home. We were recording with the noises of the street and kids playing all round us because the studio wasn't finished yet. It was very atmospheric." All of the ten songs on the album are performed in her native Bamana tongue. She has never felt any need to sing in English or French, she insists. Her subject matter is broad. There are love songs "about the fragility of our relationships." And there are highly personal songs, "that ask questions and search for answers." And there are songs that reflect Rokia's social concern. Both the songs with the Kronos Quartet, for example, are about the plight of children. Probably the most important subject Rokia discusses on this album is Childhood. It's something that she feels very strongly about and is the main theme of the title track 'Bowmboï' and 'Manian'. "I wanted to talk about this period as the basis of every human beings life." She continues "There are no universal rights for people, no level platform from which we all start and so our whole lives are linked in one way or another to our childhood environments."

Several songs on Bowmboï and most of her previous album Wanita deal with the position of women in modern African society. "We have a lot of freedoms our mothers didn't have," Rokia admits. "But women have to be brave to fight for their rights. You need courage. So a lot of my songs pay tribute to strong women." To many, this has made Rokia a role model. Yet not everybody is ready to accept her forthright attitude. "I'm saying stand up and you can be free," she says. "But some people don't like that. They want their stars to have bleached skin and wear lots of make-up and drive around in big cars. And they're not going to get that from me." What they're getting instead is some of the most profound music being made anywhere in the world right now. And that should be more than enough for anyone.