



MALI BLUES

**A film by Lutz Gregor
Featuring Fatoumata Diawara,
Ahmed Ag Kaedi, Bassekou Kouyaté, and Master Soumy**

“Goosebump-inducing! Nuanced meditations on the limbo of the diaspora and celebrations of Mali’s ethnic plurality color the fabric of this film, which vibrates with urgency and life. Marks a zenith of the music documentary genre.”
—Cinema Scope

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LOG LINE

In this vibrant concert film, four dynamic Malian musicians use their music to stand up to religious extremism.

SYNOPSIS

The West African country of Mali is a birthplace of the blues, a musical tradition later carried by the transatlantic slave trade to America's cotton fields. Yet today, the music and musicians of Mali are in grave danger. As fundamentalist Islam and sharia law become more widespread, dance and secular music are prohibited, musical instruments are destroyed, and musicians are forced to flee their homeland.

The vibrant documentary *Mali Blues* follows four artists using their music to stand up to religious extremism: Fatoumata "Fatou" Diawara is a rising star on the global pop scene (memorably featured in Abderrahmane Sissako's acclaimed drama *Timbuktu*). Bassekou Kouyaté is a celebrated ngoni player and traditional griot. Master Soumy is a young street rapper influenced by hip-hop. Ahmed Ag Kaedi is the leader of the Tuareg band Amanar and a guitar virtuoso. Each combines rich musical traditions with contemporary influences, using their music to stand up to extremism and inspire tolerance and peace.

SELECTED FILM FESTIVALS

World Premiere, Visions Du Réel, Switzerland
North American premiere, Toronto International Film Festival, Canada
International Documentary Film Festival (IDFA), The Netherlands
Best Film and Opening Night Film, Unerhoert Music Film Festival, Germany
Ciné Droit Libre Film Festival, Burkina Faso, Senegal and Mali
FIFA Festival of Films on Art, Canada
Indie Lisboa, Portugal
Africolor Film Festival, France
Filmfest München, Germany
Film Africa, United Kingdom
Leeds Film Festival, United Kingdom
Cinema Politica, Sweden
Stockholm International Film Festival, Sweden
Warsaw International Film Festival, Poland
Blick Moscow Music and Film, Russia
Joburg International Film Festival, South Africa
Addis Ababa General Meeting, Ethiopia
Dubai International Film Festival, United Arab Emirates
DocPoint Helsinki Documentary Film Festival, Finland
African Diaspora International Film Festival, United States
Santa Barbara International Film Festival, United States
Green Mountain Film Festival, United States
Minneapolis St. Paul Film Festival, United States
AFI African Film Festival, United States
Matatu Festival of Stories, United States
FilmFest DC, United States

IN THE PRESS

“Nuanced meditations on the limbo of the diaspora and celebrations of Mali’s ethnic plurality color the fabric of this film, which vibrates with urgency and life. The showcase of Mali’s ripe musical heritage—from *ngoni* riffs to pulsating percussions and soulful raps—connects and engages audiences in the combat against silence and demand for explanations. Opening the room for honest conversations about long-standing traditions, including those that are due to be broken, this documentary is at its bravest when tackling real issues that threaten its subjects’ collective voice. The goosebump-inducing sequence in which Fatou heroically denounces female circumcision not only serves to advocate music’s potential in affecting real-life practices, but also marks a zenith of the music documentary genre.” —Cinema Scope

“[*Mali Blues*] follows Fatou as she prepares for her first concert in her home country of Mali, a place with a deeply rich music history that was threatened when Islamic fundamentalists banned music in 2012. A colorful, vivid look at Fatou’s complicated history with her home, *Mali Blues* is both a triumph for Fatou and for Mali’s music traditions.” —CBC Music

ABOUT THE FILM

Synopsis courtesy of Gebrueder Beetz Filmproduktion

Mali, situated in the heart of Western Africa, is a cradle of today’s blues and jazz. It is believed that slaves brought their traditional African rhythms and sounds to the North American cotton fields. For centuries music has strengthened Mali’s cultural identity, musicians are holding strong positions in society. Following Fatoumata Diawara, shooting star of the global pop scene, *Mali Blues* is a musical journey, discovering the country’s rich musical culture as it is threatened by radical Islam. On our way, we meet other committed musicians who are fighting for unity and the freedom to express themselves through their music.

Singer and songwriter Fatoumata Diawara fled Mali as a young girl, escaping an arranged marriage. “I left to be able to write down my own story,” she says, “Even though I knew it would be difficult for a black woman like me, who split without her parents’ consent. Overcoming this pain has shaped me and my music.” She then lived abroad, launching an internationally successful career and acting in the Academy Award-nominated film *Timbuktu*, directed by Abderrahmane Sissako. But when northern Mali came under Islamist attack, she began to think about returning from abroad. Now she is preparing for her first concert ever in her home country.

Between 2012 and 2013, northern Mali was under the rule of Islamic fundamentalists, who occupied the towns of Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu. They went after the country’s culture, destroyed ancient cultural heritage and imposed an incredibly strict Sharia law, which banned all music. They tortured musicians and issued death threats against them. Many musicians fled south, to towns including Bamako. French troops and the U.N. “blue helmets” helped the Malian government to fight back the jihadists and started peacekeeping operations. But the Islamist terror has reached other parts of Mali, too. Even the capital Bamako has become increasingly insecure.

Tuareg musician Ahmed Ag Kaedi had to flee his Northern hometown from the Islamist terror and escaped to Bamako. 1,500 km from home, he misses his family and the

desert. In his music he comes to terms with his yearning for a life lost through religious fanaticism.

The on-going political and religious conflict in northern Mali is also subject to the music of famous Ngoni player and traditional Griot Bassekou Kouyaté, and Malian Rapper Master Soumy. Both are fighting for a united Mali in peace and religious tolerance. "We, as musicians, have voices that are stronger than weapons," explains Kouyaté.

Fatoumata Diawara is preparing for her first concert ever in her home country. This is not only a political urge, but also a personal issue: "When I heard that music was forbidden in Mali I felt that the world would stop turning. We musicians need music to survive, it is healing our pain."

Though these musicians' songs are dramatically different, they all have one thing in common: their music shakes, moves and connects people, consoles and heals, giving them the strength to fight: against a radical Islam, for change in their country and for a future with tolerance and peace.

ABOUT THE MUSICIANS

FATOUMATA DIAWARA

Fatoumata Diawara was born in Ivory Coast. At age 12, she went to live with an aunt in Mali, where she spent the remainder of her childhood years. Her aunt worked as an actress, and Fatoumata herself soon started playing minor parts, and appearing in early movies. The part of Sia from the movie *Sia le reve de python* became the role she is best known for—to this day people in Mali address her by the character's name. At age 19, she left Mali for Paris, where she struggled as an actress. As a sideline, she worked as a session musician in productions by Oumou Sangare. Then, however, she took a decisive step by recording with France-based American singer and radio host Dee Dee Bridgewater for her album *Red Earth*. In 2011, Diawara recorded her debut album for the World Circuit label in London. In *Mali Blues*, she returns to her family in Mali and plays her first concert ever in her old home country at the festival on Niger River. Though she left to escape an arranged marriage, she returns as a one of Mali's most successful singers.

BASSEKOU KOUYATÉ

"When the Islamists silence music, they rip out Mali's very heart," says Bassekou Kouyaté, one of the country's most prominent musicians. "Without music, you can no longer marry, no longer be buried. A Sunday in Bamako without music? That then would be completely foreign to our ancestors' culture and our identity." And Kouyaté should know: after all, he belongs to one of Mali's oldest praise singer families. The songs he performs date back to the 13th-century when Sundjata Keita, the founder of the kingdom of Mali, united the region's many ethnicities. Until today, music has been the blood flowing through Mali's veins, with praise singers are any family's mouthpiece and social glue: they mediate strife, sing at weddings, baptisms, and funerals; even the president cannot receive a visitor without a *griot* at his side. In a country with an illiteracy rate of over 70%, songs are an essential means of communication, keeping both the past alive and breaking news.

Bassekou Kouyaté's career began 20 years ago. From a local wedding musician he grew to an international star of world music. He revolutionized his traditional

instrument, the *ngoni*, by adding more strings. In 2007, the BBC voted him Best African Artist of the Year, and his debut release *Segu Blue* Best World Music Album of the Year. After years of collaboration with musicians from around the world including Taj Mahal, Toumani Diabate, Santana, Bela Fleck and Youssou Ndour, his latest album was even nominated for a Grammy. President Amadou Toumani Toure began inviting Kouyaté to represent Mali at state receptions, where played for most of West Africa's presidents, from Abdoulaye Wade to Blaise Compaore. Kouyaté recently created his own group, called Ngoni ba. (Even the mere idea of a quartet only of ngonis is revolutionary for Mali; a bass ngoni was devised exclusively for the group!)

MASTER SOUMY

While Malian *griots* can earn a living with their "praise songs" about rich businessmen or politicians, Malian rappers still have traditionally had a hard time living off their music. With recent political events in the country, however, ordinary folk (never the subject of praise songs anyway) began to increasingly turn to rappers. In Senegal, in 2000, dozens of rappers spoke out against long-standing president Abdou Diouf. Recently, the popular "Y'en a Marre" movement ("I've had it"), headed by some of the country's best-known hip-hop stars, prevented Abdoulaye Wade's corrupt regime from attaining a third term in office. (There are similar examples in other West African countries like Burkina Faso or Congo, where hip-hop plays an important role in political life)

In Mali, Master Soumy is considered a pioneer still of the hip-hop scene. On his 2007 album, *Toukaranké*, he rapped about the country's issues with migration, lack of schooling for girls, power outages and poor road conditions. After the crisis following the military coup of 2012, rappers have increasingly commented directly on political events.

More than half of Mali's population is under the age of 18, and it is they who are most influenced and inspired by rap music. When the Islamists started prohibiting music in northern Mali, rappers sang out against it with works like Master Soumy's song "Explique ton Islam" ("Explain your Islam"). In it, the faithful Muslim asks the jihadists what torture and violence would have to do with Islam.

AHMED AG KAEDI

Tuareg musician Ahmed Ag Kaedi, from northeast Mali, has also found international success. Born in Kidal and known for his poetic and enigmatic lyrics, he gained recognition with his band Amanar.

In the early 1990s, a second Tuareg rebellion took place in Mali. At the time, many Tuareg fled to neighboring Algeria, Ahmaed Ag Kaedi among them. After living as a refugee in Algeria, he spent time at training camps in Libya established by Colonel Gaddafi. When a regional peace treaty was reached and Gaddafi dismantled the camps, Ag Kaedi put down his rifle, picked up his guitar and went back to Kidal to focus on music henceforth.

At this time, Ali Farka Toure celebrated his first Grammy Award for *Talking Timbuktu* (1994), recorded with Ry Cooder; the acclaimed Tuareg band Tinariwen, who would go on to win a Grammy, had returned to Mali; and the Malian music scene was evolving. In early 2000, the Festival au Désert became a vital musical destination and promotional tool for Tuareg culture. Annually, first near Kidal and then at Timbuktu, Sahara musicians from Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Algeria met at the music festival, which quickly grew to attract musicians including Robert Plant and Bono. In 2012 the Festival au Désert took place for the last time in the desert at Timbuktu. Shortly

thereafter, Islamists ransacked the venue and took with them whatever could be taken.

When the Islamists conquered Ahmed Ag Kaedi's hometown of Kidal, they burned his equipment and threatened to cut off his fingers should he ever pick up a guitar again. His family insisted that he flee to Bamako. When global interest in the events in Mali erupted in 2013, Ahmed Ag Kaedi and his band received numerous offers to play gigs in Europe. As musicians directly affected by the events, they represented the Festival au Désert at various occasions worldwide.

These days things around Amanar have quieted down again. Following the Festival sur le Niger in Segou in 2015, Amanar recorded their latest album in Burkina Faso.



FILM CREDITS

Title	<i>Mali Blues</i>
Running time	93 minutes
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Aspect ratio	16:9
Copyright	2016
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Director	Lutz Gregor
Executive Producer	Christian Beetz
Producer	Kerstin Meyer-Beetz
Director or Photography	Axel Schneppat
Sound	Pascal Capitolin
Sound Mix	Jörg Höhne
Editors	Markus Schmidt, Michelle Barbin
Line Producer	Kathrin Isberner
Production Accountancy	Daniela Schöne, Sandra Zentgraf
Post production supervisor	Philipp Weigold
Production Manager	Anique Roelfsema, Nick Pastucha
Production Assistance	Bärbel Mauch, Mory Touré, Céline Deligny, Marianne Kühn
Additional cinematographers	Dieter Stürmer, Konrad Waldmann, Abdellah Coulibaly, Mohamed Lamine Touré, Bakary Sangaré
Assistant Producer	Lea-Marie Körner
Commissioning Editor ZDF/ ARTE	Tobias Cassau
Production company	Gebrueder Beetz Filmproduktion

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