

## West African Guitarist, 'Pop Star,' To Perform Jan. 23 At UCSD

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Jan Jennings

Internationally acclaimed guitarist and composer Habib Koité, described by *Rolling Stone* as "the biggest pop star of the West African nation of Mali," will lecture and perform Jan. 23 at the University of California, San Diego. The event is free and open to the public.

Koité will present his Regents' Lecture/Concert, *Electronic Griots: Musical Connections in the Cycle of World Music*, at 6 p.m. in UCSD's Price Center Theatre. The lecture/concert is being presented by UCSD's African and African-American Studies Research Project (AAASRP) and the Departments of Sociology, Ethnic Studies, and Music in conjunction with Black History Month.

"Habib Koité utilizes a pan-Malian perspective in which he combines musical traditions from diverse ethnicities and regions of his country with classical guitar, jazz, blues, and flamenco styles," says Bennetta Jules-Rosette, UCSD sociologist and director of AAASRP which is celebrating its 10th anniversary and an ongoing interest in exploring the theme of borders, boundaries and new frontiers. "Habib's visit also is part of the *Symposium on African Artistic Creation* co-sponsored by the AAASRP and the San Diego Museum of Art. His unique brand of border-crossing music is of particular interest to the AAASRP."

"I'm curious about all the music in the world, but I make music from Mali," says Koité. "In my country, we have so many beautiful rhythms and melodies. Many villages and communities have their own kind of music. Usually, Malian musicians play only their own ethnic music, but me, I go everywhere."

Koité says his goal is to make music that touches every Malian culture - and along the way, mingle in the jazz, blues, flamenco, hip hop and whatever other contemporary, avant-garde sounds that inspire him.

"What sets Koité apart is a distinctive guitar style, both acoustic and electric, that's neither heavily traditional nor emphatically Western," writes the *Boston Herald*. "It all adds up to a contemporary and original take on the roots of Malian music."

Among Koité's unique approaches to playing the guitar are at times tuning the instrument to the pentatonic scale and playing on open strings and at other times playing music that sounds closer to the blues or flamenco, easily changing between styles and moods. His singing style is restrained and intimate with varying cadenced rhythms and melodies.

In addition to the public lecture/concert while a UCSD Regents' Lecturer, Koité will present a workshop, two concerts, and three lectures. The lecture topics include the Khassonké griot tradition, history and styles of the African guitar, and musical education in West Africa.

Koité's music also will be the topic of a *Youth Forum*, a community outreach program for students from the Boys and Girls Clubs of San Diego, the Sojourner Truth Academy of San Diego, and the Preuss School at UCSD who are writing essays on African art and music.

Described by *Pulse!* as "a brilliant triple threat, a singer, composer and guitarist," Koité is a musician with one foot in the past and the other in the future. A descendant of the Khassonké griots (keepers of ancient oral and musical traditions), his grandfather played a *g'noni* (traditional stringed instrument), his mother was a well-known griotte, and his father played the guitar. He graduated with honors from the Institut National de Arts in Mali where his musical training was both classical and contemporary and where he enjoyed considerable freedom.

In 1988, Koité formed his own group, *Bamada* (jaws of the crocodile), which consists of young Malians from the suburbs of Bamako. With this group, Koité began experimenting with innovative combinations of traditional music and contemporary sounds yielding a new fusion of styles. He composed original lyrics and combined the harp-like *kora* and the *balafon* (wooden-keyed xylophone) with drums, base, guitar, and harmonica, resulting in a new and award-winning sound.

Koité won first prize at the Festival Voxpole in Perpignan, France, and the Media-Adami prize from Radio France International, both in the early 1990s. His first album, *Muso Ko*, 1995, received worldwide attention and placed him on the map as a young musician to follow. His second album, *Ma Ya*, 1998, stayed at the top of the World Music Charts of Europe for three months and received critical acclaim when it was introduced into the United States in 1999. Koité recorded his third album, *Baro*, in 2001, and his most recent album, *Foly*, in 2003. He has performed throughout Europe, the United States and Canada.

"The perfect world music artist," writes *Rhythm Magazine* of Koité, "His work has the kind of integrity and balance that promises lasting stardom - something so rare and wonderful that no world music think tank could conjure it up."

Jules-Rosette says that in addition to his performing talents, Koité "is a versatile composer and lyricist whose works make a major contribution to popular music, world beat, and avant-garde jazz."

*Berliner Morgenpost* writes: "In between griot tradition and contemporary hip hop, Africa's pop star Habib Koité conquers the rest of the world."

Over the past five years, AAASRP has hosted appearances by internationally acclaimed musicians Dominic Kanza, Mighty Mo Rodgers, Don Byron, Marie and Anita Daulne from the Afro-Belgian musical group *Zap Mama*, and Thomas Mapfumo during Black History Month.

"Habib Koité's lectures and concerts will expose students and community audiences to the ideas and artistry of a stellar African performer and will continue AAASRP's efforts to disseminate scholarly research about African and the African diaspora cultures to the larger community," says Jules-Rosette.

The AAASRP's mission is to promote research and intellectual understanding of the issues that face African-Americans and the African diaspora populations today from the perspectives of the humanities and the social sciences. The project sponsors public events that bring diverse groups of people together, both to foster a comparative and interdisciplinary environment and to share information and exchange scholarly ideas.

For further information on Koité's Jan. 23 lecture/performance, call Jules-Rosette at (858) 822-0265.

Media Contact: Bennetta Jules-Rosette, (858) 822-0265, or Jan Jennings, (858) 822-1684