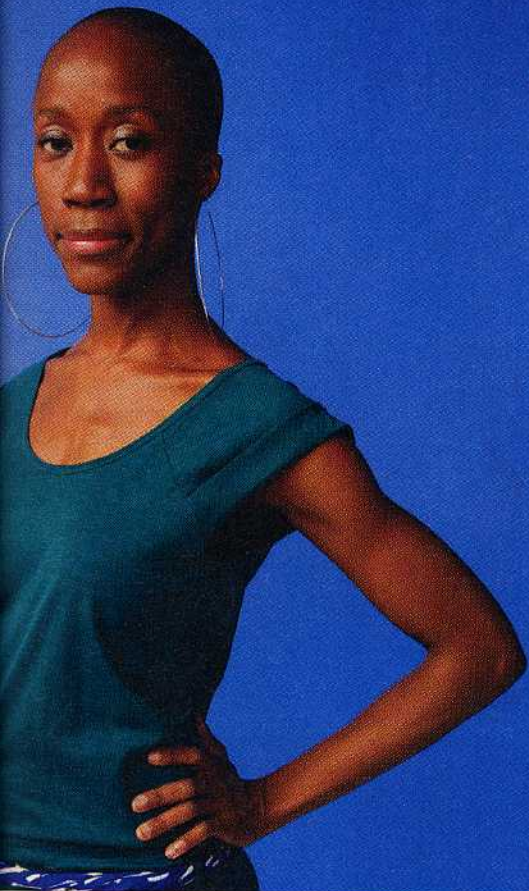


## Africa



### Rokia Traoré Beautiful Africa

Nonesuch (45 mins)

★★★★★

Indie Rokia: Mali music icon goes art-rock in Bristol



We have come to expect a lot from young Malian pop-rock singer Rokia Traoré, who surprised the world with her deeply traditional 2003 album *Bowmboi*, and then knocked us for six with her 2009 release *Tchamantché*, a rocky, rootsy interplay of Malian tradition and modernity. *Beautiful Africa* is as rich and exciting as anything she has made before, and benefits from a noticeable maturity. The dreamy guitar riffs of her last album are still there, with the lead melodies often spelled out by *ngoni* as they were in her previous albums, but Rokia's voice seems more sure of itself as it soars from one style to another.

This shift in gear was perhaps helped by the fact she has been branching out into acting, appearing last year in the stage production *Desdemona*, the re-imagined story of the Shakespearean character directed by Peter Sellars. Each track on *Beautiful Africa* is a world in itself, changing pace rapidly, leading the listener through varying tones and rhythms, but always held together by Rokia's voice, which knows when to stand back and when to take control. 'Sikey' is notable for the vocal interplay, with Rokia's narration of a story punctuated by the interjections of her two backing singers. The nine-minute long 'N'Téri' is a stage-show in itself, the *ngoni* plucking a continuous line as Rokia whispers and trills a tale. 'Ka Moun Kè' rolls along, with a sparse, reverberating guitar line supporting a chorus of voices, a staccato *ngoni* and, of course, Rokia's voice – impassioned, expressive and gentle.

It really doesn't get much better than this in today's African music. Rokia's work – both recorded and live – is exciting, surprising and always perfectly executed. Many of her songs slip into French and English and, though this sometimes can be awkward, it gives an overarching feeling that this music belongs not just to Africa, but to the world. We should consider ourselves very, very lucky.

▶ TRACK TO TRY: *Lalla*

Rose Skelton

### Osibisa Heads

Repertoire Records (48 mins)

★★★★★

### Happy Children

Repertoire Records (56 mins)

★★★★

Afro-rock from the 70s finally comes home



As a rock-obsessed teenager, I bought Osibisa's self-titled debut album on its release in 1971 and its follow-up,



*Woyaya*. I can't claim that I was a world music pioneer. I was simply intrigued by Afro-rock, which at the

time seemed like another faddish subgenre to file alongside acid-rock, folk-rock, jazz-rock, space-rock et al. By the time of Osibisa's third album, *Heads*, and *Happy Children* a year later, I had moved on. I felt I had done Afro-rock and I ignored the releases in favour of new fashions (Ziggy Stardust and *Dark Side of the Moon*, I seem to recall). If that sounds crass and ignorant, it was. But it was also understandable. There was simply nobody around to explain that Osibisa was the tip of a huge world of timeless African music – we had to wait several decades to discover the fantastic sounds

being made all over Africa in the 70s via the crate-digging archive releases of labels such as Soundway and Analog Africa.

So catching up with Osibisa all these years on seems like an opportunity missed. *Heads* finds saxophonist Teddy Osei and his London-based Ghanaian and Caribbean band mixing Fela Kuti-inspired Afro-beat, funk-ed-up highlife grooves, a thrilling hybrid of tribal polyrhythms and rock drumming, Santana-style guitar pyrotechnics and jazz-rock horn solos. And the sound has not dated one whit – much of the material would not sound out of place on recent releases by, say, Tony Allen, Ariya Astrobeat Arkestra or Antibalas.

By the release of *Happy Children* in 1973, the classic Osibisa line-up featured on the first three LPs had undergone considerable changes and the group lacked a guitarist, resulting in the horns and keyboards being given even greater prominence. There's also a stronger American soul/funk feel – the band had just returned from recording the soundtrack to the film *Superfly TNT* in Hollywood. But the record still contains at least two Osibisa classics in Somaja, based on a traditional Ghanaian chant, and 'Fire', an irresistible Afro-beat dance tune that remains a highlight of Osibisa's live shows to this day.

▶ TRACK TO TRY: *Wango Wango* from *Heads*

Nigel Williamson

### Les Tambours de Brazza Sur la Route des Caravanes

Buda Musique (58 mins)

★★★★★

More than just funky drummers



The group's name suggests they are a drum and dance ensemble. But Les Tambours de Brazza are much more than

that. With 20 years experience they have assimilated many musical influences during their travels. Whilst there is plenty of fine drumming, particularly from group leader Emile Biayenda, there is also some terrific instrumentation and singing on this disc. The album opens with a typical fast-pace vocal, drum and guitar *generique*, which many Congolese bands use to open their shows. However Les Tambours de Brazza show their great versatility on the second track 'Zanzibar (Sur la Route des Caravanes)' by having the instrumentation led by violins, accordions, *oud*, piano and clarinet. The performance is an instrumental, mixing the styles of East Africa's *taarab* music, Egypt and tango. The group's lead vocalist Fredy Massamba shines on several tracks performed in the modern Congolese *rumba* style. However, on 'Zebola' they have as a guest the very sweet voice of Angelou Chevauchet. He is a veteran from the mid-80s, much loved in Brazza, and here he sings one of the best songs

»



# Africa

I've heard in recent years.

In the past Les Tambours de Brazza have shown interest in jazz explorations and on several tracks here they drift into jazz-rock territory, with a fine horn section and great keyboards. Guest pianist Ray Lema is particularly enjoyable, playing a Fender Rhodes against an acoustic guitar on 'Sun Ray'.

This is a highly varied and musically adventurous album. Whilst their live performances are strikingly visual there is no sense of anything being missing when listening to this recording. Its musicality allows it to stand up on its own.

▶▶ TRACK TO TRY: *Ya Ya Wélé*

Martin Sinnock

## Ebo Taylor Ebo Taylor

Mr Bongo (39 mins)

★★★★

## Ebo Taylor & Uhuru Yenzu Conflict

Mr Bongo (31 mins)

★★★★

### Mr Bongo dusts off the old Ebo



A leading innovator, musician, arranger and early collaborator with Fela Kuti, CK Mann and Pat

Thomas (to name but a few), Ebo Taylor had a career spanning six decades. A man in total control of his art form, an unsung hero and a true originator



of contemporary African music, he pushed the new style of African music called highlife (popularized by the highly influential ET Mensah) forcefully in the direction of Afro-beat. The self-titled album showcases the extreme musical talents of this man's absolutely unique, soulful guitar style. It ranges across blues and jazz with pulsating African rhythms – the essence of which is encapsulated in the opening track 'Saana'. He's complemented by unison voices in pidgin English lyrics and vocals, flowing keyboards, organ lines and deft guitar embellishments. The tightness of the horn section can be deeply felt in the standout track, 'Heaven', which has been sampled by Usher and Ludacris.

Following on from the winning formula of his debut album, Ebo delivers further monumental slices of true Afro-beat on the 1980 re-release, *Conflict*. Rich guitar parts are interlaced with amazing horns and accentuated by fast moving super-funky basslines, as typified by tracks such as 'Love and Death', an eight minute Afro-beat monster. The precision of the guitar perfectly matches the call-and-response of horns and vocals; it's a joy to the ears.

▶▶ TRACK TO TRY: *Heaven from*

*Ebo Taylor*

Peter Adjaye

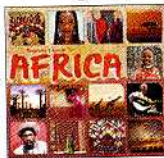
## VARIOUS ARTISTS

### Beginner's Guide to Africa

Nascente (3 CDs, 215 mins)

★★★★

### Bubblegum, Mouse Boys & more



These kind of compilations, which seek to present what the box describes as 'the best of African music, past, present

and future' look, on the surface, like simple and straightforward enterprises. Apart from the genuine 'beginners' targeted in the title, most of us will probably look at the track listing and imagine we could do a better job. The reality is rather different, the task is much harder than it looks, with a whole set of issues that don't apply when making a mixtape for your mates. First, the compiler is limited by which labels will license material. If a label won't play ball, that could well mean that half a dozen of the most significant acts are not available. Then you have to strike a geographical balance and spread the spotlight across the entire continent. And how do you strike up a balance between the classic recordings by

the legendary names of past decades with the sounds of modern Africa today?

Finally, there's the tricky question of the running order and how you fit together so many different sounds, styles and cultures without it sounding like a disorganised mishmash. Over 47 tracks, spread across three discs, compiler Phil Meadley has handled all of these issues with aplomb, to create a terrific overview of the world's most musically vibrant continent.

Established names such as Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Thomas Mapfumo and Kanda Bongo Man sit easily alongside today's emerging stars such as Bajoli and Hip Hop Pantsula. West African heroes Amadou & Mariam share room with the Malawi Mouse Boys and the township bubblegum of Brenda Fassie nestles happily alongside the trance-like tones of the Musicians of the Nile. There's no Baaba Maal, Youssou N'Dour or Ali Farka Touré. But the selection is so diverse and well-balanced that the absence of a few big names is hardly missed. A beginner's guide; but one assembled with incomparable expertise.

▶▶ TRACK TO TRY: *Kunvera* by Malawi Mouse Boys

Nigel Williamson

### Teranga! Senegal

Sterns Music (2 CDs, 136 mins)

★★★★

### Senegalese singer-songwriters: a world away from David Gray

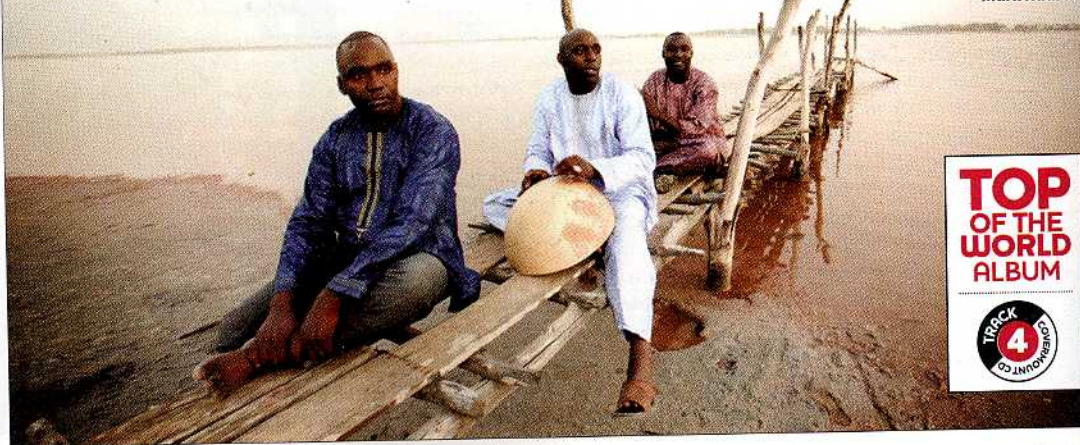


That Senegal has an acoustic singer-songwriter scene (as opposed to a traditional music scene) has been apparent for at least a decade with the emergence of traditionally inflected singer-songwriters such as Daby Baldé and Les Frères Guissé (pictured). But from outside it has been difficult to tell if this was a miniscule niche largely bankrolled by Western record labels or a genuinely significant local phenomenon. The answer, judging from this lively compilation, is very much the latter. Alassane Seck Guèye's interesting liner notes argue that this tendency has been there at least since independence, with artists such as earnest folkie Soleya Mama and politico-experimentalists Xalam providing an alternative to the Senegalese pop mainstream represented by Youssou N'Dour and mbalax (the fusion music of Western pop and soul with Latin and Senegalese *sabar* music).

Most of the musicians here weren't even born when those artists were in their prime. There are some fantastic old timers, such as raw-voiced troubadour Ablaye Ndiaye Thioussane and veteran griot Ndiaye Samba Mboup here but there's also a real sense of an emerging new sensibility that belongs to the here and now. While Seck Guèye implies that this music is somehow at variance with mbalax, several of the tracks, such as Yoro Ndiaye's 'Xarit', are essentially tuneful, semi-acoustic mbalax, and none the worse for that. Daby Baldé adds a tuneful Fulani element. Trumpeter Jules Guèye brings the majestically throaty tones of Wolof diva Kharr Mbaye Madiaga to what would otherwise be a piece of poolside jazzy mbalax. A couple of tracks verge on the insipid and there a few clunky synths, but this an entertaining and enlightening set, full of characterful voices and memorable melodies that walk the line between tradition and modernity in diverse way. Most heartening is the emergence of a number of exciting new women singers – such as Queen Biz and Mariama Kouyaté – twisting traditional flavours with the subtlest shades of rap, R&B and reggae.

▶▶ TRACK TO TRY: *Halaname* by Daby Baldé

Mark Hudson



## Afrosoul

Buda Musique (66 mins)

★★

### Motherland soul and Afro-disco



The ways we discover new music are varied and changing. Today, anyone curious about world music

can research artists online. If you are unsure what you want to research, there are countless online radio programs. *Songlines* readers get a free CD every issue that keeps them abreast of the latest developments. Could it be that anthologies such as this are increasingly redundant? Well, there are a couple of name acts on here. Souljazz Orchestra, for instance, and Gnawa Diffusion, with disappointing reggae number. But there's a lot of B-grade filler. The most promising newcomer featured is Touareg blues band Imidiwen. Unless you skip most of the tracks, you have to wait an hour to get to the best cut, 'Djougouyaba' by Kady Diarra, a disco remix of a traditional Burkinabe tune.

▶▶ TRACK TO TRY: *Djougouyaba* by Kady Diarra

Alastair Johnston

TOP OF THE WORLD ALBUM

