

## Acoustic Africa--Habib Koite and Vusi Mahlasela Biographies

After worldwide critical and commercial success in 2006, 2011 and 2013, the fourth installment of **Acoustic Africa's** exhilarating journey focuses on the richness of the African traditions of voice and song. In 2016 Acoustic Africa will feature two beloved singers, **Habib Koite** and **Vusi Mahlasela**.

A modern troubador with extraordinary appeal, **Habib Koité's** musicianship, wit and wisdom translate across cultures. Hailing from the musically prolific West African nation of Mali, the guitarist and composer has been named the biggest pop star of the region by Rolling Stone, delighting audiences the world over and selling more than 250,000 albums. Over the past decade, his artistry and magnetic personality have made him an international star, placing him firmly among the leading figures in contemporary world music.

**Vusi Mahlasela**, is simply known as 'The Voice' in his home-country, South Africa, celebrated for his distinct, powerful voice and his poetic, optimistic lyrics. His songs of hope connect Apartheid-scarred South Africa with its promise for a better future. Raised in the Mamelodi Township, where he still resides, Vusi became a singer-songwriter and poet-activist at an early age. After his popular debut on BMG Africa, *When You Come Back*, Vusi was asked to perform at Nelson Mandela's inauguration in 1994 and continues to spread Mandela's message as an official ambassador to Mandela's HIV/AIDS initiative, 46664.

In 2016 Acoustic Africa's marketing and outreach will advance the mission of **Oxfam International** to meet the social, environmental, and public health challenges present throughout Africa.

### Habib Koite Bio

Malian guitarist Habib Koité is one of Africa's most popular and recognized musicians. Habib Koité was born in Thiès, a Senegalese town situated on the railway line connecting Dakar to Niger, where his father worked on the construction of the tracks. Six months after his birth, the Koité family returned to the regional capital of west Mali, Kayes, and then to Bamako. Habib comes from a noble line of Khassonké griots, traditional troubadors who provide wit, wisdom and musical entertainment at social gatherings and special events. Habib grew up surrounded by seventeen brothers and sisters, and developed his unique guitar style accompanying his griot mother. He inherited his passion for music from his paternal grandfather who played the kamele n'goni, a traditional four-stringed instrument associated with hunters from the Wassolou region of Mali. "Nobody really taught me to sing or to play the guitar," explains Habib, "I watched my parents, and it washed off on me."

Habib was headed for a career as an engineer, but on the insistence of his uncle, who recognized Habib's musical talent, he enrolled at the National Institute of Arts (INA) in Bamako, Mali. In 1978, after only six months, he was made conductor of INA Star, the school's prestigious band. He studied music for four years, graduating at the top of his class in 1982. (In fact his talent was so impressive, that upon graduation, the INA hired him as a guitar teacher). During his studies, Habib had the opportunity to perform and play with a series of recognized Malian artists,

including Kélétiogui Diabaté and Toumani Diabaté. He sang and played on Toumani Diabaté's 1991 release *Shake the World* (Sony), and Kélétiogui Diabaté is now a fulltime member of Habib's band. Habib takes some unique approaches to playing the guitar. He tunes his instrument to the pentatonic scale and plays on open strings as one would on a kamale n'goni. At other times Habib plays music that sounds closer to the blues or flamenco, two styles he studied under Khalilou Traoré a veteran of the legendary Afro-Cuban band *Maravillas du Mali*.

Unlike the griots, his singing style is restrained and intimate with varying cadenced rhythms and melodies.

Mali has rich and diverse musical traditions, which have many regional variations and styles that are particular to the local cultures. Habib is unique because he brings together different styles, creating a new pan-Malian approach that reflects his open-minded interest in all types of music. The predominant style played by Habib is based on the danssa, a popular rhythm from his native city of Keyes. He calls his version danssa doso, a Bambara term he coined that combines the name of the popular rhythm with the word for hunter's music (doso), one of Mali's most powerful and ancient musical traditions. "I put these two words together to symbolize the music of all ethnic groups in Mali. I'm curious about all the music in the world, but I make music from Mali. 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. My job is to take all these traditions and to make something with them, to use them in my music."

In 1988, Habib formed his own group, Bamada (a nickname for residents of Bamako that roughly translates "in the mouth of the crocodile"), with young Malian musicians who had been friends since childhood. In 1991, Habib won first prize at the Voxpole Festival in Perpignan, France, which earned him enough money to finance the production of two songs. One of those tracks, "Cigarette A Bana (The Cigarette is Finished)" was a hit throughout West Africa. After the release of another successful single entitled, "Nanalé (The Swallow)," Habib received the prestigious Radio France International (RFI) Discoveries prize. This award made it possible for the group to undertake their first tour outside of Africa during the summer of 1994.

In January 1995, Habib met his current manager, Belgian Michel De Bock, who, along with his partner Geneviève Bruyndonckx, are the directors of the management and production company Contre-Jour. Working together, they recorded his first album *Muso Ko*. Upon its release the album quickly reached #2 in the European World Music Charts. From that point forward, Habib became a fixture on the European festival circuit and began to spread his infectious music and high energy shows around the world. Habib has played at most of Europe's major venues and festivals, including the Montreux Jazz Festival, WOMAD, and the World Roots Festival. In the spring 2000, he even toured Europe and Turkey as an invited guest with the legendary avant-garde jazz group, the Art Ensemble of Chicago.

Habib's second album, *Ma Ya*, was released in Europe in 1998 to widespread acclaim. It spent an amazing three months at the top spot on the World Charts Europe. A subtle production which revealed a more acoustic, introspective side of Habib's music, *Ma Ya* was released in North America by Putumayo World Music in early 1999 and quickly helped establish Habib as one of world music's most exciting new figures.

*Ma Ya* spent 20 weeks in the top 20 of the College Music Journal New World music chart, and broke new ground at AAA rock radio, spending several months in regular rotation on commercial stations across

the country. The album held the number one spot on the World Charts Europe for an amazing three months. Ma Ya has sold over 60,000 units in North America and over 100,000 worldwide, which is a tremendous success for a new world music artist.

The critical and commercial response to Ma Ya was tremendous. Habib was featured in hundreds of newspapers and magazines including People Magazine, Rolling Stone, Le Monde, Songlines, De Standaard, Le Soir and the cover of Global Rhythm magazine, to name a few. In the years since, he has also been featured in the US on National Public Radio's All Things Considered, WXPN's World Café, PRI's The World, the House of Blues Radio Hour "Mali to Memphis" special, prestigious international programs such as CNN WorldBeat, and in June 2007 was the subject of a two-page photo spread in Vanity Fair magazine. In 2001, Habib Koité and Bamada became one of the few African artists to appear on Late Night with David Letterman one of America's most popular television variety shows, Habib's artistry and powerful personality earned him the adoration of fans such as Jackson Browne and Bonnie Raitt, both of whom ended up visiting Habib in Mali. They have both done a great deal to support Habib's music, by promoting private events designed to attract new audiences and even performing live with Habib on stage. Habib and his band even made a guest appearance on Bonnie Raitt's 2002 album Silver Lining, in which Bonnie and Habib performed a duet on the cowritten song "Back Around."

Habib Koité & Bamada released their third album, Baro, in 2001 on Putumayo. The recording was also a huge success, selling more than 100,000 copies worldwide and further expanding Habib's global audience.

One of the keys to Habib's success has been his dedication to touring. A true road warrior, Habib Koité & Bamada have performed nearly 1000 shows since 1994 and appeared on some of the world's most prestigious concert stages. Habib has also participated in a number of memorable theme tours alongside other artists. In February 1999, Habib and American bluesman Eric Bibb toured in support of the Putumayo compilation Mali to Memphis, which highlighted the connections between Malian and American blues music. In the fall of 2000, Habib participated in the "Voices of Mali" tour with Oumou Sangaré, one of West Africa's most renowned artists. Habib has also taken part in the Desert Blues project with fellow Malians Tartit and Afel Boucoum and the Putumayo Presents Acoustic Africa tour with South African troubadour Vusi Mahlasela and the rising young star Dobet Gnahoré from the Ivory Coast.

Habib Koité & Bamada's transfixing performances have endeared them to an ever-growing audience, and in 2003 they released Fôly! , a double CD of live material.

Devoted fans have waited a long time for Habib to return to the recording studio. As with many craftsmen, Habib is a perfectionist, and spends a great deal of time composing and arranging his material. Recorded in Mali, Belgium and Vermont, Afriki finds Habib exploring new musical directions. The overarching theme of Afriki, which means "Africa" in the Malian Bambara language, is about the strengths and challenges of the African continent. "People here in Africa are willing to risk death trying to leave for Europe or the USA, but they are not willing to take that risk staying to develop something here in Africa," says Habib. "Life can be really good or really bad wherever you live. People need to understand that. Even though Mali is poor, we still have good quality of life: You can walk outside and smile and someone will smile back. I have thought about it a lot, and I am not sure if poor countries have a worse quality of life."

Source: [http://habibkoite.com/index2\\_uk.php?page=biographie](http://habibkoite.com/index2_uk.php?page=biographie)

## **Vusi Mahlasela Bio**

Vusi grew up in the Mamelodi township, just outside of Pretoria, South Africa, where he still resides. As Vusi tells it, he grew up a happy kid and was blind to the injustices in his country. His grandmother operated a Shebeen behind their home. Due to the cultural boycott inflicted by Apartheid, black South African music was hard to come by and was banned from being played on the radio. So, they played American records in the pub. James Brown. Motown. The Commodores. And whatever South African and African recordings they could find: Mahotella Queens, Mahlatini Queens, Miriam Makeba, Dark City Sisters, Fela Kuti. Young Vusi and his neighborhood friends formed a little band of their own and started making music of their own, inspired by the recordings they heard wafting out of the Shebeen. Vusi built his first guitar from fishing line and a cooking oil can and taught himself how to play. In 1976, Vusi's political education began as he witnessed the devastating massacre of more than 200 black South Africans in the Soweto Uprising. Vusi responded through his music, inspiring other musicians and listeners around him.

Vusi began to write songs of justice, of freedom, of revolution, of love, of peace and of life. He joined a poetry group, The Ancestors of Africa, and also joined the Congress of South African Writers, a group of like-minded artists and writers, including Nobel Laureate Nadine Gordimer who paid for Vusi's first guitar lessons. At this point, his political activism truly began. For the "crime" of writing songs of freedom and human dignity, Vusi was held in solitary confinement; he was harassed by the police repeatedly. Many of his friends fled the country. Through this struggle, his songwriting became not only prolific but also healing for himself and for his listeners. And as Nadine Gordimer so vividly puts it, "Vusi sings as a bird does, in total response to being alive." He simply became known as "The Voice."

At the fall of Apartheid, Vusi was signed to Shifty Records/BMG records and finally recorded his first album—a collection of songs he'd been writing his whole life. In the title track, "When You Come Back," he sings to his friends and the political exiles who had left the country telling them that "we will ring the bells and beat the drums when you come back" and he also calls for humanity asking that we "give something to the world and not just take from it."

This song and its altruistic message rang loud in cars, at parties, and in the homes of both blacks and whites. It truly became an anthem. In 1994, Vusi was proud and very humbled to perform this song at Nelson Mandela's presidential inauguration. "The Voice" was soon heard all over the world. Since the release of that first album, Vusi has traveled the globe sharing his songs of truth and hope, and sharing his country's past and promise for a better future. Americans first caught a glimpse of him in the 2002 documentary *Amandla! A Revolution in Four Part Harmony* that chronicles the strength of music during the struggle against Apartheid. Shortly after the debut of the film, fellow South African Dave Matthews signed Vusi to his label, ATO Records, and released "The Voice," a collection of songs from Vusi's South African releases. *Guiding Star* and 2011's *Say Africa*, produced by Taj Mahal, soon followed. His albums have received mass critical acclaim and celebrated musicians have taken note of his powerful voice and message. As the LA Times puts it, Vusi is a "rare and mesmerizing musical mind.. with a voice that seems

to have few limits.” Vusi has shared the stage with Dave Matthews Band, Sting, Josh Groban, Paul Simon, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Hugh Masekela, Angelique Kidjo, Bela Fleck, Ray LaMontagne, Amos Lee and many more. He’s also performed at two TED conferences, the Skoll World Forum, The Elders annual meeting, Nelson Mandela’s 90th Birthday, Mandela Day and more. But perhaps his biggest gig was in 2010 when he helped ring in the World Cup in South Africa, at Orlando Stadium in Soweto; “When You Come Back” also served as the theme song for ITV’s World Cup coverage in the UK.

Vusi was humbled this spring to receive an honorary doctorate degree from the prestigious Rhodes University in Grahamstown, SA; a couple of weeks later on Freedom Day, South Africa’s President Jacob Zuma awarded Vusi with the National Order of Ikhamanga recognizing him for “drawing attention to the injustices that isolated South Africa from the global community during the Apartheid years.”

This past year, the SAMA Awards (South African Music Awards) chose to honor Vusi with a Lifetime Achievement award to recognize his accomplishments both at home and abroad. The honor made the troubadour take a look back and realize that in what felt like a blink of the eye, it had been twenty years since the release of *When You Come Back*. In celebration, he got the band together and put on a big show at the Lyric Theatre in Johannesburg—and recorded it.

The result is *Sing to the People*, a live recording including songs from throughout the first twenty years of his career, out now on ATO Records. The album contains joyful performances and the visceral sounds of an audience that’s hanging on every single note and already knows every single lyric by heart. It’s toe-tapping and heart-thumping. It’s Vusi singing to the people.

Source: <http://vusimahlasela.com/bio>