

THE FEELING TRANSLATES

by Bill Kopp

Senegalese kora master Diali Cissokho finds his groove in NC

In 2010, soon after Senegalese musician Diali Cissokho settled in Pittsboro, he found himself sad and bored. “I have to play music,” he told his wife, Hilary Stewart, a Pittsboro native. “I [can’t] find another job; I’m not good at that. That doesn’t make me happy.”

Stewart was supportive. “She’s very strong, and she pushed me,” Cissokho recalls. “She said, ‘Yes, you’re going to find a band.’” In fact, it was Stewart who gathered the musicians who would make up Kaira Ba. “I didn’t build this band,” Cissokho says. “My wife and her mom, they built this band.” Eight years later, Cissokho has a strong command of the English language (he spoke very little when he first arrived in the U.S.) and has just released his third album, *Routes*. Touring in support of the record, he and Kaira Ba play Isis Music Hall on Sunday, July 8.

Cissokho’s dance band formed when Stewart invited a lifelong friend, Berklee-trained guitarist John Westmoreland, to come over. “We hung out and started playing,” Cissokho says. “Me and John, we started getting along, and that was the beginning of Kaira Ba.”

He continues, “My wife and my wife’s mom, they always tried to find right musicians for me, because they know my talent and they know I’m kind of difficult to guide. [For] the music I’m doing, you have to have a big heart. You have to be positive with music; then I can take you. And they were looking for that kind of person.”

They soon found the right people. Cissokho sings and plays the kora, a 21-string West African instrument that looks like a cross between a lute, a harp and a banjo. He’s backed by Kaira Ba, which includes Westmoreland plus three more North Carolina-based musicians: bassist Jonathan Henderson, drummer Austin McCall and percussionist Will Ridenhour.

Cissokho’s music is steeped in

Senegalese traditions. The music he makes with Kaira Ba combines those flavors with Western instrumentation and musical sensibilities. But, he admits, it wasn’t initially that way. “When I started playing with John, he always followed my direction; he always tried to play African style,” Cissokho says. “But [once] he was comfortable, I said, ‘John, you know what? Now it’s time for me to join *your* style

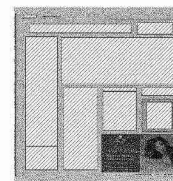
of music, to move out, to be comfortable with a new style.’ So we started sharing.”

The band released its debut, *Resonance*, in 2012. That recording subtly applies a rock aesthetic to West African griot traditions, but the Senegalese flavor of Cissokho’s music isn’t diluted in the process. *The Great Peace* followed in 2014; *Routes* was released last month on Twelve Eight Records, a label founded by Henderson — an ethnomusicologist as well as a musician — who also co-produced the album.

For Cissokho, the act of making music is deeply ingrained into who he is. “We don’t just play music,” he says. “We speak. When we’re on the stage, we speak by our hearts, and the audience understands what we say.” Though his lyrics — showcasing the Senegalese Manding and Wolof cultures — are indecipherable to most Westerners, somehow the ideas and emotions get through.

A variety of guest musicians from both Senegal and the U.S. (including North Carolina “chamber soul” vocalist Shana Tucker) lend their talents to the album. A booklet included with *Routes* features liner notes that explain and contextualize each of the album’s 11 songs, and printed English translations express the depth of Cissokho’s lyrics about family, death, friendships, love and Ndoli, a mythical creature in Mandinka folklore.

The international feel of the album also draws from Malian traditions (the instrumental parts of “Story Song”) and Latin culture (“Salsa Xalel”). The latter is “just something I decided to combine,” Cissokho says with a laugh. “It’s a *little* bit Senegalese.”



Written in the aftermath of being harassed by drunken concertgoers at the Shakori Hills Festival, "Baayi Leen" is a reminder that "judging people without knowing their story is wrong," Cissokho says.

The musician relates a story that gives him great satisfaction. "We were in a performance, two or three years ago. When we were done playing, a lady asked me, 'Do you realize what kind of music you do? Your music is like a medicine. I was having a bad day, a sad day. And I don't understand what you're singing, to be honest. But I feel you, and it's a medicine for my heart. You have something that's magic.'

"That's the kind of music we do," Cissokho says. "At first, people don't always get it. But one day they're going to get it." X

WHO

Diali Cissokho and Kaira Ba

WHERE

Isis Music Hall
 743 Haywood Road
isisasheville.com

WHEN

Sunday, July 8, at 7:30 p.m.,
 \$12 advance/\$15 day of show



EVERYBODY CLAP YOUR HANDS: The music of Senegal-by-way-of-Pittsboro musician Diali Cissokho, center, is steeped in Western African traditions and sung in a foreign tongue, but the international feel of his music helps the messages get through. Photo by Bruce dePyssler