



Hendrix of the kora crossover



RAY PURVIS

There's a popular belief in Africa that all great kora players are possessed by "djinn" or spirits much like the Mississippi blues players who traded their souls to the devil at the crossroads.

Hailed as the Hendrix of the kora, Seckou Keita, who fronts a quintet of European and African musicians that blend jazz, Indian and classical formats, remains sceptical.

For him, gaining expertise on the instrument was all about hard work that started at the age of three and progressed from stage to stage every seven years.

"But Hendrix of the kora is OK, I'll take it in," he laughs over the phone from his home in England. "Sometimes I can go down deep into the instrument like people say that Hendrix did on stage. So there you go. I'll take it in."

With its pure ringing sound, the kora is a notoriously difficult instrument to master. It's a cross between a harp and a lute with 21 strings. Played by maestros such as Toumani Diabate, Foday Musa Suso and Mory Kante, this traditional instrument has come to symbolise West African music abroad.

Keita has developed his own tuning of the kora that's a hybrid of the four traditional tunings from

different African countries. He has forged his own unique style of playing.

"I believe that tradition is an everyday living experience. My grandparents have done their bit and taught me their traditions but I think my generation need their own new traditions to build on."

Besides being a virtuoso on the kora, the Senegal-born musician is also an outstanding percussion player on the four-drum bougarabou and the tama or talking drum.

During the mid-90s he enjoyed a parallel career as a master drummer in the popular African Celtic crossover band Baka Beyond. "Some people only know me as a drummer," he says. "It's only a few people who know me from both sides."

Born into the family of Mali's founding father Sundiata Keita, he is distantly related to Salif Keita, the albino singer known internationally as the Golden Voice of Africa.

"It's a big, big family that's really open and goes back to the 13th century," he explains.

He was brought up by his mother's family — the Cissokhos, one of the leading griot families in Senegal — and was formally trained in music from the age of three.

"Where I grew up music was all around and you live with it every

day. The music I first started playing had been passed down through my mother's family for generations.

"My grandfather trained me to follow in the family tradition."

Inspired by his years of touring with his uncle Salo Cissokho in Europe and India, Keita has now assembled an international quintet that draws together musicians from Senegal, Italy, Egypt and Gambia. The ensemble made its debut in 2004 and has gone on to impress audiences at both jazz and world music festivals around the world.

One of the features of Seckou Keita's latest album *The Silimbo Passage* is the fluid interplay of strings (violinist Sami Bishai), kora and Keita's sister Binta Suso's bluesy singing. "At the moment this is my favourite sound. With the Egyptian violin there is so much I can do on the kora in a jazz improvising way."

It all sounds a bit hard to imagine: kora playing, drumming, jazz, Indian, classical and traditional West African music all in one concert. "To prove it works, you'll just have to come to the concert and listen for yourself."

Seckou Keita SKQ play the Beck's Music Box on Tuesday and Wednesday. Tickets from BOCS outlets and perthfestival.com.au



Versatile: Seckou Keita's quintet impresses audiences at jazz and world music festivals around the world