

Saturday, October 11, 2014, 8pm
Zellerbach Hall

Afropop Spectacular

Krar Collective & Bassekou Kouyaté



Jacob Crawford

KRAR COLLECTIVE

Temesgen Zeleke *krar*
Genet Asefa *vocals*
Amare *kebero drums*



BASSEKOU KOUYATÉ

Bassekou Kouyaté *lead ngoni*
Amy Sacko *lead vocals*
Moustafa Kouyaté *bass ngoni*
Mahamadou Tounkara *yabara, tama*
Abou Sissoko *medium ngoni*
Moctar Kouyaté *calabash*

Tonight's program will be announced from the stage.

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Krar Collective are Temesegen Zeleke on *krar* (a five- or six-stringed harp), singer Genet Asefa, and drummer Amare. The unstoppable trio, dubbed the “White Stripes of Ethiopia” for their minimalist rocky sound, base their repertoire on traditional Ethiopian songs, but have created a unique style by radically reworking the material that creates a timeless appeal. Vocals feature collective cadences and long solo poems; musical stops and starts create an organic syncopation, and the *krar* can alternate from being lead to rhythm instrument. Ms. Asefa is magnetic in performance and recording: her soaring ululations and perfectly delivered melodies fill the spacious sound. The ancient *krar* dates far back into Ethiopian history.

An important part of the Ethiopian *azmari* minstrel tradition, the *krar* is steeped in the practice of wandering troubadours performing in cafés around the country, while legend has it that the instrument itself descends from King David’s lyre. Mr. Zeleke gives these traditions a contemporary twist and, in his hands, plugged in and strummed with hypnotic grooves, the *krar* becomes a gritty, ancient rock guitar. Mr. Zeleke is a revolutionary *krar* player, and as a young student was mentored and encouraged by legendary Ethio-jazzman Mulatu Astatke.

The spellbinding rhythms of the double-headed *kebero* drum provide the trio’s backbeat. Traditionally used to accompany the ancient religious celebrations of the Ethiopian Orthodox church, the *kebero* finds a new context in the energetic grooves of Krar Collective’s performances.

About the *krar* (from Wikipedia): “The *krar* is a cordophone, and is usually decorated with wood, cloth, and beads. Its five or six strings determine the available pitches. The instrument’s tone depends on the musician’s playing technique: bowing, strumming, or plucking. If plucked, the instrument will produce a soft tone. Strumming will yield a harmonious pulsation.”

Bassekou Kouyaté is one of the true masters of the *ngoni*, an ancient traditional lute found throughout West Africa. It is the key instrument for the *griot* culture. Unlike the *kora*, whose history goes back only a few hundred years, the *ngoni* has been the main instrument in *griot* storytelling going back to the 13th century, during the days of Soundiata Keita, the founder of the Malian Empire. The repertoire Mr. Kouyaté plays is Bambara music from the region of Segu. Bambara music is pentatonic in nature and as close to the blues as you can get in Africa.

Over the years, Mr. Kouyaté has collaborated with many musicians from his homeland Mali and around the world. He was one of the key musicians on Ali Farka Touré’s posthumously released album *Savane*, having also previously toured with Mr. Touré, stunning audiences worldwide as the band’s solo *ngoni* player. He has played in the Symmetric Trio alongside Toumani Diabaté (*kora*) and Keletigui Diabaté (*balafon*), was part of Taj Mahal’s and Mr. Diabaté’s *Kulanjan* project, and features prominently on Youssou N’Dour’s album *Rokku mi Rokka* and Dee Dee Bridgewater’s *Red Earth*.

Mr. Kouyaté was born in a village called Garana, almost 40 miles from Segu, in the remote countryside on the banks of the Niger River. He was raised in a traditional musical environment, his mother a praise singer and his father and brothers exceptional *ngoni* players. When he was 19 years old, Mr. Kouyaté moved to Bamako, where he met the young Toumani Diabaté. By the late 1980s, Mr. Kouyaté was part of Mr. Diabaté’s trio, and they recorded their first albums together, *Songhai* and *Djelika*. In 1996, Mr. Kouyaté married the singer Amy Sacko (the so-called “Tina Turner of Mali”), and they have been in high demand for the traditional wedding parties that happen in the streets of Bamako. After many years being a “sideman” to many musicians both in Mali and globally, Mr. Kouyaté has now put together his own band, *Ngoni ba* (meaning “the big *ngoni*”), Mali’s first *ngoni* quartet.