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TAFFETAS

The sensational new kora/ guitar/ bass trio meet **Jamie Renton**.

Taffetas are making their radio debut, the trio of musicians – two from Switzerland, one from Guinea-Bissau – are squeezed into a cramped BBC studio. Ibrahima Galissa's kora ripples at the very centre of the music, Marc Liebeskand's guitar and Christophe Erard's double bass dance around its edges. It's a simple, gentle sound. The joy that the three of them derive from playing together seems to fill the room. Afterwards, in a vacant studio next door, Marc and Christophe agree to be interviewed. Ibrahima can't speak any English and is anyway busy re-tuning his kora for their next piece. This means that our conversation is conducted against the glistening sound of the 23-string African harp (a pleasure sadly not possible to convey in print). There's a real word-of-mouth buzz about Taffetas. Their self-titled debut album has only had a very limited release on the tiny Asmia label back in Switzerland, but everyone who hears it gets excited. DJ Charlie Gillett is one such convert, having been handed a copy in the street by a friend of the group's. He was impressed enough to invite them over to London to perform on his programme, which is how we've ended up talking in this studio.

Liebeskand and Erard are hardly the first Westerners to try and mix it up with the kora: everyone from Damon Albarn to Bob Brozman has given it a go in the past, so how come this pair of reformed jazz-heads from the land of cuckoo clocks and luxury chocolate have managed to do it so well? The answer lies in the frequent trips they've made to West Africa to immerse themselves in the music. Christophe first bumped into Ibrahima on a trip to Senegal back in 1995 and since then has brought him over to Switzerland for numerous concerts. Marc was the sound man at one such live show four years ago, the three of them hit it off straight away and vowed to work together at the soonest opportunity. It took until last year for this to come about, when Ibrahima secured a work permit and the trio could finally get down to business, rehearsing together for six months before recording the album.

Ibrahima comes from a kora-playing family in Guinea-Bissau. He has been surrounded by the sound of the instrument all of his life. In spite of this, his father was against him taking up music, insisting that his son should concentrate on studying and getting a proper job. But Ibrahima was determined to play the kora (whatever his dad had to say about it) and escaped from family pressure (and the

debilitating poverty of Guinea-Bissau), by going first to Senegal and subsequently on to Lisbon, where he now lives.

Marc and Christophe are both seasoned musical explorers. Marc has spent time with contemporary jazz greats in New York, soaked up the music over in Brazil and spends half of each year studying with master musicians in India. He also spent two years in West Africa, playing with notable locals including Toumani Diabaté. Christophe meanwhile has made many trips to Asia and Africa. Most recently travelling to Mongolia to find out about throat singing. Going out to learn from musicians on their own turf is not always easy. Marc has encountered suspicion and hostility from some of the Indian musicians that he's approached (others have become close friends). Whilst over in Africa he often encounters musicians who try to use him as a way of escaping to the West. He can appreciate their need to seek a better life, but given the choice would always rather play with those who are just in it for the music.

"That's why I love working with Ibrahima so much," he smiles, "because, like me, he lives to make music." Many of the global influences that they've picked up on their travels find their way into the Taffetas sound. Christophe, for example, unleashes a little bit of throat singing at the end of the first tune they play for the radio audience, whilst Marc uses a guitar tuned like a sitar

on their second piece. There are also elements of blues, jazz and folk in the music, and Christophe is confident that this broad range of influences will make themselves felt more deeply as the project develops.

The natural chemistry that exists between the three is the real secret of their success. "The human factor is very important," agrees Marc. "We love to play together." Both Marc and Christophe are involved in numerous other projects back home, but if they had the choice they'd gladly give them all up for Taffetas. "Every musician dreams of being able to play with only one group," states Christophe. "And I think we would all love it to be this one."

HURACAN DEL FUEGO

Venezuelan percussion maestros hit Croydon. **Jon Lusk** was there...

Though its Afro-Cuban cousin is familiar in most parts of the world, Afro-Venezuelan music is hardly known beyond the borders of Venezuela. Here, as in so many other parts of the Caribbean and Latin America, the slave trade brought dispossessed peoples from West and Central Africa – in this case, largely from the Congo river basin and the area now occupied by the Ivory Coast, Ghana and Benin. Although in the larger

Taffetas



Photo: Dean Dorat