

# MY WORLD

## DEE DEE BRIDGEWATER

The American jazz singer and three-time Grammy Award winner talks to **Jo Frost** about her journey to find out more about her African ancestry and how it led her to Mali and a wealth of musical discoveries

PHOTO BY GREG MILES

With Mali's heralded 'Next Big Thing' Songhoy Blues on the cover, it seems fitting that in the same issue we also have a predominantly Mali-focused playlist chosen by the jazz singer Dee Dee Bridgewater. With a career spanning 40 years, Bridgewater is still the ultimate dynamic performer, very much in evidence when she recently sang at the EFG London Jazz Festival in November. She's an artist who radiates charisma from the moment she breaks into her captivating smile, cracks a joke or starts scatting.

Born in 1950 in Tennessee, Bridgewater has become synonymous with Billie Holiday, thanks to playing the infamous jazz singer in the stage show *Lady Day*. This wasn't her first foray in theatre – she played Glinda in *The Wiz* in 1974, an African-American version of *The Wizard of Oz*, directed by her then husband Gilbert Moses.

Bridgewater's love affair with Mali began when she started to explore her roots. "I had decided that I needed to embrace my African ancestry because being raised in the US, so many African American people have such a stereotyped and negative image of Africa," says Bridgewater. "I thought I just needed to embrace the fact that I did have this African ancestry and that in order for me to move forward in my life, I needed to embrace my past." She began listening to music from West Africa and found she had a particular connection with the music from Mali. "Every time I'd listen to music from Mali, especially *griot* music, I knew it, it was very strange... So I decided that I should go to Mali because it was spooking me out that I could understand these griot songs."

Her first visit to the country was in 2004 and what struck her immediately was the redness of the soil in Bamako – the same colour as back in her home of Tennessee. "All my life I have loved red earth," she says. As a result she decided to call her 2007 album, recorded in Bamako's Studio Bogolan, *Red Earth*. There's been no shortage of artists wanting to 'explore' their African heritage; indeed in the review of the album in #46, reviewer Nigel Williamson says he 'feared the worst...' about Bridgewater's excursion into Malian music, 'yet she proves to be a revelation. Her expressively sultry jazz-soul voice sounds totally at home surrounded by African percussion, the kora of Toumani Diabate and various other traditional instruments.'

Her time in Bamako was spent under the musical guidance of Cheick Tidiane Seck, who she was already familiar with, thanks to his work on the album *Sarala* with Hank Jones. Another confidante was the singer Oumou Sangaré – "mon énergie" Bridgewater calls her, "she's like a sister to me." In addition to Oumou, Bridgewater has chosen two other very dynamic female singers for her playlist. One discovery was Fatoumata Diawara who at that time was starting out as Oumou's backing singer. "She just has such a wonderful stage presence," says Bridgewater, "and she's so beautiful to watch. She's got an aura about her. I'm so proud of what's happening for her now with World Circuit."

*"I decided I should go to Mali because I could understand these griot songs"*

Bridgewater already knew Rokia Traoré from living in Paris and it turns out she had coincidentally met Rokia's cousin in Segou on her first visit to Mali. "I met this little boy who followed me everywhere and wanted me to correspond with him. He gave me the email address, and it was Rokia's. I was like, 'how do you have Rokia Traoré's email?' He said 'she's my cousin.'" The recording sessions for *Red Earth* took place just prior to the release of Rokia's *Tchamantché* album and there are posters of Rokia on the walls of Studio Bogolan in the promotional video.

The final Malian choice is a track from the album *Segu Blue* by Bassekou Kouyaté. "Bassekou is nothing short of extraordinary," says Bridgewater, "absolutely extraordinary and his band Ngoni ba is just... ahhhhhh!" she swoons. She's also a huge fan of Bassekou's wife too, the singer Ami Sacko, who she says reminds her of Abbey Lincoln.

Bridgewater hasn't been back to Mali since 2008 when she went with FAO (she's been a Goodwill Ambassador for the UN's Food & Agriculture Organisation since 1999). But she hopes to return with her son Gabriel, an aspiring musician who was given a guitar by Bassekou on their first visit.

The decade Bridgewater spent living in France undoubtedly influenced and educated her musically. One of the first musicians she worked with when she moved to France was the Cameroonian sax giant, Manu Dibango. "You can't imagine how amazing that was for me because I knew 'Soul Makossa' – it was such a huge hit in the US. I ended up doing up several gigs with him," Bridgewater says. "Manu's a lot of fun... and he's extremely knowledgeable about jazz music and a very versatile musician."

Over the years Bridgewater has performed with many of the jazz greats, including the likes of South African songstress Miriam Makeba of whom she speaks very fondly. But Bridgewater does confess that her one big love is for the trumpet: "I think of my voice as a trumpet; my father was a trumpet player, my first husband was a trumpet player... All of the men who mentored me were trumpet players: Dizzy Gillespie, Clark Terry and even Miles Davis. I just love trumpet players!"

At the moment she is working with a young trumpet player from New Orleans, Theo Croker, who has just released his debut on Bridgewater's own DDB label and they're currently touring together with a band. "I could be their grandmother!" she laughs. "I love working with these young musicians because they're fresh, they're not jaded, they're happy to be on the road... they're eager to explore."

"It's invigorating, and it's given me a new lease of life. This old girl wants to have fun!" she laughs. The 'old girl' claim is highly disputable, but no one who has seen Bridgewater perform live is going to disagree with her commitment to have fun. ♦

➤ **PODCAST** Hear a track from *Red Earth* on this issue's podcast

➤ **VIDEO** Watch the EPK of Dee Dee Bridgewater in Mali recording her *Red Earth* album on our YouTube channel

