

It was my friend Bob Rizzo, director of the Department of Cultural Affairs in Providence, Rhode Island, who first brought Mamadou Diabate to my attention. "Have you ever checked out that kora player from Mali? I think you'd dig him," Bob said. I hadn't, so I stopped at a record store and picked up one of Mamadou's CDs. As soon as I heard the kora, and Mamadou in particular, a light bulb went on.

Around the same time, I was struggling to write some new music, sitting at the Wurlitzer with a minidisc recorder and a bottle of Macallan, staring at a blank piece of staff paper. I had writer's block. But it was more than that. I was in search of a new direction. Working with Mamadou was the kind of challenge I was looking for.

Our first gig together was at *Wall to Wall Miles* — a 12 hour tribute to the music of Miles Davis held at Symphony Space in NYC in late March 2001. I was asked to arrange a couple of tunes by Miles for my trio with Michael Blake on saxophones and Michael Sarin on drums, along with Mamadou on kora and Famoro Diabate on balafon. Since the music from Miles' modal period had already been chosen by other groups, we decided to play some compositions from his mid-1960s quintet — a challenge as the music from this period contains lots of dense chords

and strange harmonic jumps and the kora is not a chromatic instrument (it can be tuned to one of only a handful of keys or modes). When we arrived at the venue there were about 1,100 people crammed into 900 seats, and hundreds more standing in line waiting to get in. The concert was to be broadcast live on national radio and we were scheduled to follow Joe Lovano's group. Pressure? Nah.

Following that performance, I was inspired to write some new material for this quintet, substituting piano for balafon. The result is *Peace Pipe*.

**Third Rail** is inspired by the music of Duke Ellington and the subways of NYC. I play the bass figure with a folded MetroCard (see "Swiss Cheese D," *Riding the Nuclear Tiger*, Palmetto). Solos by Mamadou and (Michael) Blake.

**Slap Happy** is about texture. I got together with each of the musicians separately at first, and then worked on integrating all of the sounds I was hearing: bass slaps trading with drum rim shots, interior piano pings offsetting kora melodies, and saxophone floating over the top of everything. This take does not have the ending that we rehearsed but, like many happy mistakes, it is better than what I had written. Frank takes a slap solo, then Mamadou brings it back home.

**Peace Pipe** was originally titled "Rocksteady" (from the movement in Jamaican music during the mid-1960s). This take turned out to be much more tranquil than I had imagined as I was writing it. It had such a nice feel that it made more sense to re-title the tune rather than record it again. Another happy mistake. Blake and Frank solo.

Written by Mamadou, **Dakan** means "destiny" in Mandinka. It refers to his belief that as a *Jeli* — a traditional Malian musician who uses music and oratory to sustain people's awareness of the past — he is destined to play the kora. Frank doubles the bass line with muted piano. Solos by Mamadou, Blake, and me.

**Goin' Back** was written by Neil Young (*Comes a Time*, Reprise, 1978), one of my favorite songwriters. Neil writes beautiful, simple melodies that have character, a talent I greatly admire.

**Disposable Genius** is the theme for the NPR radio show "On the Media." This version is a reworking of the original which I wrote some years back for a Jazz Composers Collective concert. The title refers to a young musician hyped by record labels as the next big thing, who is then suddenly dropped after not living up to expectations. Tomas provides an orchestral feel. Mamadou is up first and then Peter takes it left.

**Music is Music** is an improvised tune. Following this first take, Mamadou said, "Okay, I am ready to record one now." I was tempted to leave his comment and the ensuing laughter on the CD. It was one of my favorite moments at the session.

With **Realization**, my aim was to write something with chord changes and an extended form — a train of thought spinning itself out.

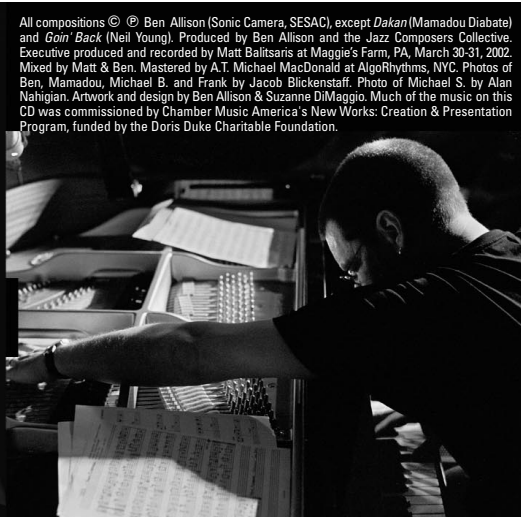
I first recorded **Mantra** with my band Medicine Wheel (*Third Eye*, Palmetto, 1999). This time around, we stretched out the form and then reworked the solo section to feature Mike Sarin.

Big thanks to: Mamadou, Frank, Michael B, Michael S, Peter, and Tomas, Bob Rizzo, Matt & Margaret Balitsaris, Terry Coen, Pat Rustici, Mark Edwards, A.T. Michael MacDonald, my folks, brother Raf, Matt Wilson, Ted Nash, Ron Horton, Chamber Music America, Sid Whelan, Luigi Santosuosso, Seth Abramson, friends and supporters of the Jazz Composers Collective, and most especially Suzanne DiMaggio.

— Ben Allison, May 2002

Other Palmetto discs By Ben Allison:  
*Riding the Nuclear Tiger* (2001, pm2067)  
*Third Eye* (1999, pm2054)  
*Medicine Wheel* (1998, pm2038)

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Ben Allison • Peace Pipe

1. Third Rail 4:44
  2. Slap Happy 8:05
  3. Peace Pipe 6:19
  4. Dakan 6:27
  5. Goin' Back 4:46
  6. Disposable Genius 4:39
  7. Music Is Music 2:53
  8. Realization 5:59
  9. Mantra 6:53
- Total 50:52

**Ben Allison**  
bass

**Mamadou Diabate**  
kora

**Michael Blake**  
tenor & soprano sax, bass clarinet

**Frank Kimbrough**  
piano, prepared piano, wurlitzer

**Michael Sarin**  
drums & percussion

*with guests:*

**Peter Apfelbaum**  
tenor sax (tracks 1, 6 & 8)

**Tomas Ulrich**  
cello (tracks 1 & 6)

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