

Live Review: Trio Da Kali & special guests (Celtic Connections)



As Celtic Connections international musical collaborations go, an evening with Mali's **Trio Da Kali** and a good number of guests represented an exemplification of what you can expect: informality, spontaneity, visible friendships and joy in sharing music from different cultures; a night of great, sometimes unexpected, music.

As mentioned in our review of the [opening 30th Anniversary Concert](#), Trio Da Kali were down to two members after bureaucratic immigration rules meant that balafon player **Fodé Lassana Diabaté** couldn't get a visa. The duo on stage hail from two of Mali's most famous musical families, bass ngoni player **Mamadou Kouyaté** plays the same instrument as his much highly regarded father [Bassekou Kouyaté](#), and singer **Hawa 'Kassé Mady' Diabate** is the daughter of the late great singer, Kassé Mady Diabate. Joining them on stage were: from Scotland, **Jenna Cumming** and [Kim Carnie](#) (on vocals), **Donald Shaw** (accordion and piano), [Ross Ainslie](#) (low whistle), and **Innes White** (guitar); from Senegal, now based in England, [Seckou Keita](#) (kora); and from Louisiana, [Dirk Powell](#) (banjo) and **Cedric Watson** (fiddle). All are steeped in playing with musicians from other places: Trio Da Kali's only album to date was the wonderful *Ladilikan*, a 2017 collaboration with Kronos Quartet ([reviewed here](#)); Seckou also performs in a duo with Catrin Finch, is a member of the [Spell Songs](#) band, and made the excellent *SUBA* album with Omar Sosa in 2021; Dirk is an occasional Transatlantic Sessions participant, has worked with Rhiannon Giddens and Our Native Daughters, and toured Ireland with Brendan Gleeson and Mike McGoldrick; Cedric has also played with Sidi Toure and Boubacar Traore.

If we were unfortunate to get a reduced Trio Da Kali, more than adequate compensation came in the form of what was, in effect, a team song cycle – taking turns, with differing instrumental combinations, not infrequently all playing – with the relaxed intimacy of a back-porch session. The centrality of familial musical traditions – notably grandfathers – and the migration of music across the Atlantic both from Ireland and Scotland and with enslaved people from West Africa, the melding of those styles in the US, were frequently mentioned in song introductions.

Trio Da Kali played two songs from their album *Ladilikan*. *Eh Ya Ye* was introduced by Hawa by reference to her father, who wrote the song, and to her grandfather, and the power and depth of Hawa's singing was on full display. It was lovely to watch the joy and wonder on Kim Carnie's face as she fully took in Hawa's amazing vocal. The title song *Ladilikan* came towards the end of the second half and was a remarkable demonstration of Mamadou's ability to forge and hold down a serious bass groove, creating space for an exuberant jam, layered on the interplay between fiddle, banjo, kora and whistle.

Seckou Keita got the audience joining in on two of his songs, the first of which, *Keneh (Space)*, reflects on finding your place in the world and the anchor that home provides, beautifully enhanced by Hawa joining in as the song progressed. *If I Only Knew*, he told us, was written about a dream he had as a young man about his future, which his grandfather interpreted, telling Seckou that nothing lasts forever, as everything will die, and that he should always be humble.



Dirk Powell played *Rollin Round This Town* and *Olivia* (one each from his last two albums) and, to a collective whoop from the audience, *Waterbound* together with *Cumberland Gap*, which he introduced by talking about his grandfather – how big an influence he had been, how much joy he had got from playing the banjo and that *Cumberland Gap* was one of his favourite tunes. Cedric took us to the Southern States with *Little Maggie*, supported by Dirk on banjo, Donald on accordion and striking exchanges with the talking drum played by Seckou, *Mardi Gras Run*, about the Louisiana springtime rituals and festival, sung in French, and the familiar, jaunty Appalachian song *Shady Grove*, on which Cedric and Dirk swapped fiddle and banjo.

Gaelic singer Jenna Cumming is new to me, but what a delightful, clear, strong voice to listen to – she sang songs she got from The Rankin Family and Mary Ann Kennedy, and *Domhnall Nan Domhnall*, a love song from Mull, supported by Donald on accordion on one and piano on the others. Kim Carnie sang three songs from her album, *And So We Gather*, from last year, moving deftly between quite different styles on her own songs and traditional songs in Gaelic: *She Moves Me* is a disarmingly simple song that sticks in your head, with understated guitar from Innes and delicious runs from Seckou's kora; *Nighean Sin Thail* opening the second half, with its bouncy melody, the musicians locking into the rhythm, and Kim animated by the pulse, on the verge of dancing, and; *Laoidh*, written centuries ago by a Highland female poet.

At the end of the evening, Donald Shaw explained the collaboration grew out of recordings from last year when he and Ross travelled to Bamako to record with Trio Da Kali (Kim adding vocals back in Glasgow). The music was one of several recordings specially commissioned for the Cubes of Perpetual Light (miniature vertical farms growing hundreds of plants under special LED bulbs) as part of *Dandelion*, a year-long creative programme encouraging Scotland to sow, grow and share food and music – the recorded music then being played at events across the country. The other two songs Trio Da Kali played for us, *Bagola* and *Tolon*, opening the first half and closing the second half, were both recorded for that project, and on both songs, Hawa's wondrous singing was impressively embellished by Jenna and Kim.

The concert was fabulously varied and richly rewarding, fully utilising the alchemic opportunities that come from bringing different music traditions and cultures together.