

## Cleveland Museum of Art: a conversation with Fatoumata Diawara

by Jarrett Hoffman



Fatoumata Diawara aims for a particular balance in her music: respect for her Malian roots, and enthusiasm for international influences. Another balance? The singer and guitarist loves pop, which you can hear in her songs, but listeners should expect her lyrics to venture into heavy territory. And yet — another balance — when she's onstage, she radiates joy.

The fascinating and thoughtful Diawara — who will perform at the Cleveland Museum of Art's Gartner Auditorium on Wednesday, February 26 at 7:30 pm — picked up the phone last week in

Lake Como, Italy. And when someone tells you they're at Lake Como, there's only one possible response.

*Jarrett Hoffman: It's so beautiful there!*

Fatoumata Diawara: It's a special place, very peaceful.

*JH: I imagine that it's also a great place to write music.*

FD: Of course! It's so nice when you take your guitar to the lake — you get inspiration right away.

*(In the background, her five-month-old offered some commentary.)*

FD: My son is here, smiling and running around. Last year I was at the Grammy Awards with this one in my belly, and nobody could tell because I was dressing differently.

*JH: And you were there for two Grammy nominations. One of them was for your most recent album, Fenfo (Something to Say), from 2018. And your debut album was Fatou, from 2011. Will you be performing music from both of them in Cleveland?*

FD: Yes, I'm going to mix, but with more songs from *Fenfo* because I've been playing the other one for seven years. I took only two songs from the old recording, and the rest will be from *Fenfo*. I'm so excited to play the new ones.



*JH: A big part of your musical identity is staying true to your roots while taking on global influences. Tell me about how you do that — whether it's through lyrics, language, or musical style.*

FD: It's everything together. I think it's also the fact that I'm a woman, and the world needs to see more female leaders — we are not so many. And lyrics are important. In my generation, people like to sing, “Baby, my love” and things like that — “Baby, baby, my baby.”

I don't sing, “My baby.” I like to write about subjects which are important for me, because life was tough when I was a child. You know, my background is very heavy and I have a lot to say about it, so I just need to open one door to my past and I can make a new song. But the melodies have a bit of pop in them — I like pop songs.

*JH: If you don't mind talking about it, I know that one difficult event from your childhood was running away from home and going to France to join a street theater troupe. As I understand it, your parents hadn't been supportive of your artistic ambitions.*

FD: That part is important because we all need support, you know? And being a teenager is when you really feel how much people love you, or how much they don't love you. Also, as a child, my relationship with grown people was always strange — I would feel like they were judging me.

It was heavy. I was about to ask myself if it was necessary to leave: it came to my mind to kill myself. And when you look at life today, you say, wow, how many people have been killing themselves? That's why I call myself a survivor, because I could have done that. Many people do, before they can find their happiness — let's call it their freedom. If you don't have that, you're still a slave of society and tradition.

That's why I like to talk about things like female genital mutilation — which is very bad for our generation — and arranged marriage. I like to talk about society's problems.

*JH: You mentioned finding freedom, and I think that's something that comes across in your performances — you have a very active and joyful stage presence. Is that something that's always been the case for you as a performer, or something that's come over time?*

FD: It's come over time. And it's because I can't believe that I survived. For me, being on stage is still like a dream coming true. And it's huge to me. Every time, this feeling comes to me, telling me, 'You are in the light right now, and your life is your freedom. You're doing what you wanted to do — you are what you wanted to be.'

And when you realize that, you're just happy, even if you're talking about being adopted. I didn't grow up with my parents, and I'm still learning from my mom. I'm in touch with her — we see each other, we look at each other, but we don't really know each other. I'm really thankful that I could find all this love from other people, because from my family it was difficult.

*JH: Before I let you go, I want to tell people about your acting — for example in the 2014 film Timbuktu. You've said before that the music you write tells the story of who you are. I think of acting as something different, in that you're taking on another person's story. Do you feel any overlap between music and acting?*

FD: For me, they're two different ways to express myself. Any time I can do that, it appeals to my freedom. Performing is who I am — just like talking about my opinions, my love, how I would like Africa to be, how I would like women to be, and how I would like the world to be: peace, love, and unity.

I think you have to adapt yourself to play another character. It's quite difficult, but at the same time it's easy for me because I like diversity in personality — how we can be multiple people inside of one soul.

I really like acting, but most of the time, it's not my writing, my narration, or my story. I do what people tell me to do in acting. But in the music, I compose, I write, I arrange, I play — I'm involved 200%.

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