On starting before you’re reac

Musician Mikey Coltun (Mdou Moctar) discusses improvisation and tradition, what he learned from punk, and finding the right collaborators.

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As told to Jefferey Silverstein, 2740 words.

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You play in a lot of bands, and with a lot of artists. This past year, you had a success alongside the Tuareg guitarist Mdou Moctar. What was the first Mdou Moctar song you heard? What initially struck you?

I was in Mali in 2011. It’s very possible that I heard his first record *Anar,* which is an auto tune record. I’m 75% sure I heard that on a cell phone over there. Later in 2012, I was sent a live recording—it might have been his cover of “Chet Boghassa,” the Tinariwen track. The energy Mdou gave it struck me. It felt similar to my roots in the DIY punk world.

Was it apparent you shared those roots right away?

We both knew it was there from the beginning, but didn’t put it together until I went to Niger for the first time in 2017. That’s when I realized the Agadez scene is no different than the DC punk scene. People bringing in their own PA, generators, and setting up either outside of a house or in the middle of a desert or on the street. Playing for a bunch of people and kids going crazy.

There was a comfort in that.

Yes. I’ve been playing West African music since 2013 starting with Bambara music from Mali and then studying Sabar music from Senegal. I played with Janka Nabay and the Bubu Gang from Sierra Leone. His music was Bubu music, which is old witchcraft, super-hyper dance music, very fast. Those experiences were prepping for Mdou. I love Malian music, it’s more traditionally like court music in that it’s very mellow, it’s beautiful.

Going through different styles I realized Mdou’s music is not much different from what I grew up with. A big parallel for me was going to jazz school for two years. At some point I realized this music doesn’t do it for me. I love listening to it, but I can’t play this music, especially when someone’s forcing it down your throat. I went back and listened to more heavy and aggressive music. When Mdou and I connected it was the perfect fit.

You’ve spoken previously about his curiosity. Is that a core value you look for in other musicians?

Absolutely. Another big part of my childhood was experimental and improvised music. It was hard to find while playing with some of these older Malian musicians. It’s really like, “This is the way it goes.” I love their music so much, and I’ve tried many times to see if they would be open to trying something different. The answer is always no. When I met Mdou, that was a big spark because he’s down to experiment. Ahmoudou Madassane, his rhythm guitarist, is really into sound and textures. That’s my bread and butter.

Honoring and acknowledging tradition while also wanting to make forward progress can come with challenges.

100%. It’s an interesting, ongoing conversation that we have. Tradition and Tuareg culture is very important, but how far they push it is scary for them. I want to push it too but most importantly, I want to be respectful. At what point is it going too far? When they’re like, “Well, actually this is not going to work over here. Let’s not do that.” Or they’re very into clean sounds and I love that dirty stuff recorded just on a cell phone. Finding a balance between all that is hard.

You were thrown into many roles (tour manager, driver, etc.) at the same time. How did you navigate all of that?

It was terrifying, especially the manager part. Mdou approached me and sat me down in a room at our first New York show together and he said, “You’re going to be my manager. You’re coming to Niger with me right now, after this tour.” And I was like, “Sure, yeah. I’m going to do it.” I contacted as many people as I could and tried to do my best. It was tough at the beginning. I realized that Mdou never really had a good manager at the start. Introducing him to my world of people…I had a lot of connections with booking agents and different music industry people. It became easier to navigate that stuff when I realized that I do know what I’m doing and I’ve done this with my own bands, I just didn’t know at the time.

There was confidence being built.

Totally. The biggest thing for me is going back and forth between New York and Niger and spending a lot of time with that culture. Their family is really important to them. This band operates so much differently than any other band I’ve been in. Going through visas and even just sending them money. It’s a whole different thing. There’s different challenges, but I was up for it and I feel very fortunate to have done it.

Having someone in your corner really matters.

Yes, exactly. Rennie Jaffe became our new manager. He was the person I would go to when an Off White (Virgil Abloh’s label) thing would come in and I had no idea how to navigate that. At some point I knew the whole CWA visa stuff, but I didn’t know the actual managing part. He was that guy for me.

Mdou has said that you’ve helped translate the bass sound in his mind. What was some early feedback you were given? How did your role differ from the Malian music you had been playing?

The Malian music I played was further south of the Tuareg region. I love that music and listen to it often. There was some connection to Tinariwen so I would transcribe those lines. With Malian music, it’s a very different feel. Tuareg Music has a lot of triplets—sloppy isn’t the right word, but it’s like a specific type of triplet. Gnawa music from Morocco has a similar feel.

I had the Bubu music pace—repetitive, very fast moves with Malian embellishments. That’s how I approached it at first. Then I would cop one of Mdou’s lines. I would hear something, really study it and be like, “Okay, he’s doing this here. That’s a baseline.” So I would just play that. Then I would hear Ahmoudou’s chords and I would move along with him. It was scary at first, because Ahmoudou is such a harmonically rich player. It’s so different from other Tuareg music where you just hang out on one or two chords. It brought me back to ear training in music school.

You had to figure out where your part sat.

Interestingly, Mdou’s music; that type of Niger and Tuareg music, traditionally doesn’t have bass. It’s usually two guitars and drums. I could also feel where that low end was missing. Being a fan of that music for so long, I wanted to add some body to it, but also wanted to treat it with so much respect.

Was there a shift in your understanding of not only the music, but their culture at large once you were living there and participating on a deeper level?

What really did it for me was the first time I went over, I was there for about a month and a half. Mdou and I

would play three weddings a day. He kept pulling out new music and then would throw me with another band and just leave. I had to just figure it out—it was the best training for what was to come.

Is Mdou direct in his communication style? Does this impact group dynamics?

I wish there was more directness, but that's why Mdou and I work so well. At this point I understand where he's trying to go. We never talk about the music. We've never written a set list ever. There's been times where every night Mdou will play a line that's on a record that happens twice, but he's only doing it once. So everybody is confused about what's going on. I have to be that person that says, "Hey Mdou. So you're just doing it once. Souleymane, he's just doing it once. Ahmoudou, he's just doing it once." He has such a great band because we can all listen and respond to that. He can do whatever the fuck he wants on stage and we're there.

There's trust and vulnerability there.

A lot of it is improvised. This whole band is very improvisational. It's these structures, these cells that we're playing off of, but it's different every night. Mdou could hit a different chord and we're like, "Okay, we're going there."

It's part of the Mdou Moctar experience.

Exactly. There's a Tuareg song structure and Mdou's breaking that. I don't think he's conscious of that, but what he's doing is really setting himself apart. It's all emotional. Whatever song he wants to play, it's, "Okay. I feel like this is the right song for the moment."

He's not huge on traditional studio experiences. How did you track both LPs?

I love being in studios, but I grew up doing that and they haven't. The most important thing I can do as a producer is figure out how I can make them comfortable. On this last record, we did some stuff in studios, but then it was, "Okay, I know that he doesn't want to be here." We'll do the vocals backstage or in a hotel, or we'll record in my apartment (including the room I'm in right now) and it'll feel more comfortable. Like we're just sitting around playing. I learned a lot making *Ilana The Creator*. We spent a week in a studio and it was difficult. This record there was less of that.

So we said "Let's try going into multiple studios. Let's see if that makes it better." There were some advantages there. I think the next thing that we're going to do is rent a house and convert it into a studio. It'll just be the four of us. I think a lot of bands should do that if possible. If you're comfortable in a studio, do it. If you're not, you can make anything work. There's this idea that it has to be done in a studio or it has to be done in an expensive studio. I think that's complete bullshit. You can make anything sound good.

How do you organize files across different studios, engineers, etc.?

Well, it's all pretty messy. I like to do a mix down after the session, even just a rough mix and then add stuff on top to bring into to a master session later. When I go to Niger I'm not bringing the whole session with me, I'm bringing a stereo track. I like to bring it as close to a mixed sound as possible. We have such limited time together. Sending music to them to listen to, to check mixes, it's just them on their cell phones and it's not the best or the most accurate representation of it. I try to do as much as I can when I'm over there, put some headphones on them, and get it close. If anything sounds weird, I'll adjust it later.

That feels improvisational, too.

That's also another part of my job—we record twenty minute tracks and I'm responsible for cutting them down.

What's your process for that?

The most important thing, now that Mdou and I have a language together, is that I understand what he wants to do. Maybe he missed something, but he trusts that I can edit it down to, "Okay, this happened five times the first time, but this time it happened six times." Is it cool to leave at six? Or would he want it just five? Would he want it more symmetric?" I like blending the two because I think that's how original Mdou is. He brings that side, whether he knows it or not. These odd things that he does are what makes him Mdou Moctar. And it's what makes us the band Mdou Moctar.

What about translating Mdou's lyrics? How can sonic choices impact this?

We'll talk about the meanings of each song. It's important for me to know. With a song like "Afrique Victime," Mdou was doing this noise solo in another song we had. I said, "Why don't you put that in this song? With the message that you're talking about, this makes sense." He agreed, The other thing with that song was getting an up front, aggressive mix. A super powerful sound. It depends on the song. On "Tahoultine" it's a little more airy. We wanted it to breathe a bit more. We thought, "should we add strings? We realized it sounded great as is.

How do people listen to music in West Africa versus in America?

People listen to music in West Africa on WhatsApp and it's song-by-song. People here listen to records from beginning to end, or I hope they do. It's hard because that's not how people listen over there. As much as we talk about how it works, it's hard to break what's already a thing. We're talking more in depth about that for this next record of, "Let's create a story, pretend it's a movie." Using that analogy.

It must be tough to perform songs with powerful lyrical content to a crowd for whom the message might get lost. How has the band worked through this?

We are very conscious of where we play. We had a big conversation with the booking agent we first brought on. We told him, "We don't want to play world music events, we don't want to play hippie festivals. This is a rock band." It's funny because occasionally we do these world music things because maybe they pay or it makes sense on the routing. It's a big difference when we're playing a seated show to older white people versus a show where people are moshing and crowd surfing. The first time people were going off I almost shed a tear because it was like, people get it, this *is* a rock band.

It was beautiful. I looked over to Mdou and he was smiling at me. It was moment where we broke free of this world music thing. We're pushing this world music term that's so racist and not doing anyone justice, it's not working for bands. There's so many amazing bands that come over from outside of Europe and the US and North America. They get put in this box and it's the worst. They have no future, it's like they get stuck there, they print CDs and they play to older, white crowds and it's a shame.

You've also been in charge of procuring Visas for the band. Has that gotten any easier over time?

Most people in West Africa need visas for everything – the US, Canada, Europe, wherever. It's definitely an added stress when we tour. We have to think, "Well, can they get home in time to get their visas? Because they can't do it here." Or routing wise, if they apply for their visa and they don't get it, what does that mean? Can we cancel these shows and still make a tour? Luckily we haven't had to do that. We've been very fortunate. There's been a lot of headaches around last minute changes. We've been denied visas, but luckily, because this is a culturally unique band, we can apply for cultural visas as opposed to artist visas. So there's all these workarounds that we just keep trying for.

It's tough, it's never guaranteed, but it's worth the fight. Getting their visa is like climbing this mountain and then it's the stress of whether or not they are going to make it through customs. Once we see each other, everyone knows we did it. It just feels like we're doing something that seems impossible – that people don't want these guys coming in, but we're doing it.

Mikey Coltun Recommends:

Thomas Sankara Speaks (book)

The Show About The Show by Caveh Zahedi (tv)

Machines With Magnets/Seth Manchester (recording studio, mixing)

Cool Haus : Vegan Cookie Dough Ice Cream Sandwich (food)

A lunch hang with Reese Higgins of Gentle Reminder/Home Late Records (hang)

Name

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Vocation

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