



They Will Have to Kill Us First: Malian Music in Exile

Discussion Guide

Director: Johanna Schwartz

Year: 2015

Time: 100 min

You might know this director from:

This is the first feature-length film from this director.

FILM SUMMARY

Johanna Schwartz was planning to attend the 2013 “Festival au Désert” music festival in Mali when she learned about the controversial music ban imposed in the north of the country under the newly instated Sharia law. Having spent more than a decade documenting life and culture on the African continent, she felt compelled to travel to Mali nonetheless. How would this country, so culturally entrenched in musical expression, fare in a time of violently imposed silence?

In the words of Songhoy Blues drummer Nathaniel Dembélé, “If you take away music, Mali is dead.” Schwartz met with this sentiment in Mali, and returned time and again over the course of two years to capture the tales of the musicians who refused to be silenced. From matronly songstress Khaira Arby, the “nightingale of the north,” to Songhoy Blues, a four-piece band with a more modern take on the traditional rhythms of the Songhai people, who “decided to create something to lift ourselves out of the pain,” THEY WILL HAVE TO KILL US FIRST is an homage to the music alive in each and every Malian’s heart, despite the everyday abuse and turmoil defining their daily lives.

Exiled by the battles between the separatists in the North (MNLA), the jihadist groups operating in the region (AQIM, MUJAO, and Ansar Dine) and the Malian Army themselves, these musicians actively preserve and remind their fellow country-folk of music’s capacity to unite, heal, and transform. While some return to their homes, visibly scarred by the battles and others ride the wave of international success, they are united in their attempts not to be silenced, to expose the wrongdoings, and to tell the stories of their nation proving that no ban, threat, or war can strip a nation of its integral right to sound. As Fadimata “Disco” Wallet so simply states as the story reaches its end, “They want to ban music? They will have to kill us first.”

FILM THEMES

Music is a way of communicating, celebrating, and surviving for the people of Mali. When a music ban is enforced, the role of the musician to inform, empower, and unite becomes more crucial than ever.

THE ROLE OF MUSIC

On the surface music can appear solely to be a means of entertaining and celebrating, of lightening a mood, or uplifting a surrounding. Listen more deeply and one can hear the infinite amount of roles music plays in all our lives. Music unites, heals, weeps, explains. At its core music communicates the wordless, the shapeless morph of emotion underlying the human experience. Removing music from life is like taking the heat out of the sun. Without the warmth to express its color, the sun is lifeless. By enforcing a broad ban on music in northern Mali, separatist extremists amplified a message of cold, heartless control.

REFUGEE STATUS

Musician Moussa Ag Sidi lives in Gao, Northern Mali. His brother was part of the MNLA separatist army, the group who initially rose up to declare the north of Mali an independent state. The MNLA accepted the help from Al Qaida linked groups in the region to further their cause. Soon after this, the extremist groups took advantage, ousting the MNLA. Moussa initially complied with the jihadists who had taken over his home town of Gao in northern Mali. He locked his instruments away, declaring that Sharia was “OK, as long as you don’t do anything bad no harm will come to you.” But as a “red-skinned” Touareg, the ethnic group that comprised the majority of the MNLA separatist army, he feared for his life once the Malian army started moving north to reclaim Gao. Anyone with “red skin” was a suspect, and many were arrested without cause. He chose the life of a refugee, fleeing to neighboring Burkina Faso, as did Fadimata “Disco” Walett Oumar. Khaira Arby and Songhoy Blues fled their homes in the troubled north to southern Mali, where they lived as internally displaced citizens. War wages on, but what makes some remain, some flee but remain in the country, and others cross into foreign territory? Threatened with death, people do all they can to remain alive, but being forced to leave one’s home instills a sense of the temporary in most, and an overriding impulse to return where one belongs.

THE SEPARATISTS AND THE EXTREMISTS

Since 1963, a group comprising of mostly Touareg have been campaigning for a separate state. Their rebellion of the early 1990s was dampened with the signing of a peace agreement between the separatists and the Malian government. Many claim the agreement did not do much to address the concerns of the separatists. The 2012 rebellion escalated into something far more severe when religious extremists entered the equation, taking advantage of the vulnerability of Mali after the separatists rose up and a subsequent coup in the south, claiming northern Mali as their own. With 95-98% of Malians identifying themselves as Muslim, it seemed preposterous to many Malians that religious crusaders labeled their take-over as a quest to install a pure form of Islam.

REBELLION IN ALL ITS FORMS

The concept of rebellion can be paired with a host of negative concepts, but rebellion can also be a positive force. In some instances, it is the root of change in a sometimes troubled region. By continuing with their music and reaching out for a sense of creative community in a time of disparate aggression, Mali’s musicians refused to be controlled. Their songs became battle calls. They rebelled by continuing to spread their art. Having spent a lifetime bringing song to her people, Khaira declared, “It’s up to us musicians to hold this country together. We are the walls of this house. This is our job.” By simply continuing with her craft, she and many other Malian musicians served as bold representatives of the crucial role of rebellion.

“Music is like oxygen for human beings.”

Khaira Arby

“We must return and stop being the prey, being something that others use.”

Fadimata “Disco” Walett Oumar

“Our way of resisting? Our instruments.”

Oumar Touré, Songhoy Blues

FILM FACTS:

- **THEY WILL HAVE TO KILL US FIRST** had its global premiere at SXSW in Austin, Texas, in March 2015. A Kickstarter campaign raised around \$45,000 for the film's production.
- American-born, U.K.-based director Johanna Schwartz had been making documentary films for the likes of the BBC, National Geographic, and The Discovery Channel, with a particular focus on Africa. She was planning to attend the Festival au Désert in Mali in 2013. She traveled there regardless, and began filming **THEY WILL HAVE TO KILL US FIRST**.
- Songhoy Blues take their name from the Songhai Empire, which dominated northern Mali around 500 years ago. Although three of the band members have the same surname Touré, none of them are related, nor are they related to Ali Farka Touré, although one of their fathers did work as his percussionist. They released their debut album, "Music in Exile," in early 2015, and sing in their native Songhai language.
- Khaira Arby is often referred to as both "the nightingale of the north" and "the queen of desert blues." Her cousin - Ali Farka Touré - was also a widely loved Malian musician.
- Between 95 and 98% of Malians are practicing Muslims. The Malian constitution is secular and establishes freedom of religion. When Sharia law was imposed in the north of Mali in 2012, the constitution was overridden in that area.
- A landlocked country in West Africa, Mali has a population of just under 15 million. The majority live in the southern part of the country, where both the Niger and Senegal rivers are located, in addition to the capital Bamako. The Sahara Desert extends far into the north of the country. Mali is divided into eight regions and one district, and the country is the third largest African producer of gold. French is the official language.
- The Northern Malian Conflict officially lasted from January 2012 - when insurgent groups began fighting for autonomy for the northern territory which they called Azawad - to February 2015 - when a ceasefire was agreed between the government and the rebel forces. However a peace treaty was not signed until June 2015 and there is still oppression and anger on both sides.
- According to the UNHCR, just around 450,000 people were either internally displaced, primarily in southern Mali, or fled abroad during the conflict.
- In addition to banning music, the implementation of Sharia law also forbid soccer, alcohol, and cigarettes. Entertainment was strictly forbidden, and radio stations, cellular phone towers, and satellite dishes were destroyed.
- A campaign of temporary **THEY WILL HAVE TO KILL US FIRST** tattoos is underway as a show of solidarity with musicians in exile globally. Take a look at the 'Wall of Fame' on the film's website.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Read** **THEY WILL HAVE TO KILL US FIRST** co-writer Andy Morgan's book on the Malian conflict and its impact on local musicians entitled "[Music, Culture & Conflict in Mali.](#)"
2. **Donate** funds to the [MUSIC IN EXILE FUND](#) which actively supports musicians living in dangerous conditions and facing censorship to their art.
3. **Support** any of the musicians featured in the film by buying their music and sharing their sounds with those around you. Songhoy Blues, Khaira Arby, and Fadimata "Disco" Walett Oumar's band Tartit are all available on iTunes and at your local independent record store.
4. **Live** your passion. Do not compromise in the face of those who try to silence you.

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