

# ...from OUAGADOUGOU

## Ed Stocker gets seduced by the hospitality of Burkina Faso's capital city during its bi-annual film festival

This has to be the world's most decrepit taxi. Inside its battered green shell, tufts of foam sprout from the seats and a vast crack in the front windscreen twinkles in the bright sunshine. Where once upon time there were door handles, frayed pieces of string have long replaced them. I'm in a *taxi vert*, the ubiquitous mode of transport serving the city centre of Burkina Faso's hot, dusty capital. As we head through the traffic jams of fume-spewing mobylettes and bicycles, the taxi driver reaches down to a wooden box fitted with a single dial beside his legs. This makeshift contraption turns out to be a radio; the usual spot on the dashboard is a cavernous hole.

'FESPACO, FESPACO, FESPACO,' the reverberating voice on Radio Pulsar shouts excitedly. The DJ is name-checking Africa's biggest film festival, hosted in Ouagadougou every other year. The week-long event is in full swing and the airwaves have gone into FESPACO overdrive; local group Les Frères Coulibaly have even



Clockwise from above: djembé players at the FESPACO opening ceremony; a music shack near avenue Kwame Nkrumah; Ghanaian singer Kodjo Antwi



released a song about it. Suddenly a familiar tune comes onto the radio – 'Zamouna' by Didier Awadi – and the taxi driver creases into laughter at the strange foreigner humming away on his back seat.

Ouaga may be celebrating African film, with hundreds of screenings organised around town, but this is West Africa and music is never far from festivities. Burkina Faso – a small, landlocked nation – might not have the profile of some of its larger neighbours, but its musical heritage is just as impressive. At the French Cultural Centre's shaded café, away from the hustle and bustle of the street, Omar Mambon of music organisation Dankan Production talks me through some of stars: the *kora*-meets-rap of Yeleen; Tim Winsey and the traditional repertoire of the Samo people; the deep-voiced *djongo* of Bill Aka Kora. But it's hard to get international recognition. "Mali and Senegal have large communities in Europe," Mambon explains, "so it's easier for them to sell their music abroad."

Local music features heavily at the Stade du 4 Août where thousands of punters pack into the upper tiers for FESPACO's opening ceremony.

Each time musicians Sissao, Alif Naba and Yeleen reference Burkina, the crowd goes wild, sending a wave of cheers echoing around the ground. It's a four-hour marathon of music, dance and speeches, attended by society's top brass. A particular standout is Ghanaian singer Kodjo Antwi (pictured left), whose long dreadlocks flow dramatically around him as he moves about the stage. He's followed by a troupe of athletic *djembé* drummers, a procession of giant puppets, choreographed dancers, street

acrobats and an eccentric clown called Papa Boyayé. Then, to cap it all, a fireworks finale lights up ecstatic faces.

Every night during festival week, live music rings out from the Place de la Nation until the early hours. This is when Ouaga's young come out to party. Seated on their parked-up mobylettes, couples cuddle up to each other as vendors weave through the throng selling boiled eggs and cold drinks. The more boisterous take to a platform in front of the stage, throwing their hands in the air and letting their hips shake. Reggae blasts from a stack of speakers as Ouagalais singer Jah Verity, sporting a red, green and yellow *tricolore* beanie, intones: '*Au Darfour, tout le monde est fou*'. A recent signing to Tiken Jah Fakoly's Fakoly Production label, he tackles everything from the humanitarian crisis in Sudan to corrupt African presidents.

Yet walk down one of Ouaga's main drags – or visit one of the music shacks selling CD-R recordings – and you're likely to hear Ivorian *coupé-decalé* alongside local music. There's a strong ethnic crossover between the two countries and Jah Verity is one of many musicians who have spent time in Abidjan, Ivory Coast's largest city, lured by the bright lights of a more developed and commercially successful music industry. The cultural influences have only grown over the last few years due to the continuing tension between Ivorian government forces and rebels that has led to a large émigré community in Burkina Faso's capital.

And those Ouagalais that decide to make the trip across the border in search of a better life in richer West African countries? They nearly always return. Because, despite the dirt, the dust, the daily grind and the gridlocked congestion, there's something utterly beguiling about the humility and hospitality of Ouagadougou. ●

**CINEMA** For the winners of this year's FESPACO main prizes, see the World Cinema reviews section on p92



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