

SONGLINES MUSIC AWARDS 2009 THE WINNERS

We're delighted to announce the winners of the inaugural *Songlines Music Awards*:

Best Group Amadou & Mariam

Newcomer Kiran Ahluwalia

Best Artist Rokia Traoré

Cross-Cultural Collaboration Jah Wobble & The Chinese Dub Orchestra



Many thanks to our readers and members of the WOMAD elist who voted online (over 1,400 people) and who provided us with an impressive list of nominations – four in each award category (see #59 for the full list). After much debate and deliberation, the *Songlines* editorial team have selected these four winners. They include some of the foremost artists on the world music scene, alongside an up-and-coming name to watch and some invigorating collaborative sounds.

PODCAST You can hear music from all the winners on this issue's podcast

ONLINE Hear more music on the interactive sampler: www.songlines.co.uk/interactive/060, plus check out previous features on Amadou & Mariam and Rokia Traoré on the website: www.songlines.co.uk/awards2009



PHOTO YOURI LENQUETTE

BEST GROUP

Amadou & Mariam

What else can we say about this superstar duo from Mali? Resplendent in gold on the front cover of our January/February issue, this much-loved couple are perennial *Songlines* favourites and we feel they are deserved winners of the Best Group award.

FEATURE You can read more about them in #57, now available online

ALBUM *Welcome to Mali (Because Music)* was reviewed in #57



NEWCOMER

Kiran Ahluwalia

"This is the first time you've had the *Songlines Music Awards*, right?" asks Kiran Ahluwalia down the phone from the US. She's the winner in the Newcomer category, inevitably the one that's going to throw up interesting new names. "Wow," she gasps, "I've been part of history-making with *Songlines*."

Sometimes a record turns up that just gets under your skin. There's the warm, silky voice which twists and slips seductively around a yearning melody and the sweet tingling sound of Portuguese guitar and accordion. And that's just the first song. Other numbers on *Wanderlust* are accompanied by more typical Indian instruments like *tabla* and *sarangi*, as the voice swoons and subtle harmonies slip one to another. Ahluwalia creates an intoxicating world of heightened emotions – something that *ghazal* singers in India have been doing for hundreds of years. But *Wanderlust* is different.

I hesitate to call it a fusion record, because it's not. There's something more subtle going on here. But perhaps it's not surprising that Ahluwalia is open to many influences given her peripatetic upbringing. She was born in India, but moved around between Patna, the capital of India's poorest state, Bihar, and New Delhi. Her family is Sikh, but she was educated in a Catholic school. "We listened to the radio and a lot of records at home – ghazals and Bollywood," Ahluwalia recalls. "My mum would write down songs from the radio and I would try and memorise them. Some were quite erotic and my mother got embarrassed about the words." At the same time she was singing Sikh hymns in the temple every Friday.

She left India, aged nine, for Toronto, Canada, where she befriended an Italian girl: "Sikhs and Catholics have similar attitudes to bringing up girls – strict, basically." When she was at high school, "once I got fed up of playing my ABBA and Bee Gees records, I'd listen to records of the very best ghazal singers like Jagjit Singh, Vithal Rao [who became her teacher], Ghulam Ali and Shobha Gurtu [mother of Trilok]." She ended up doing a degree in international relations: "But music was always a passion, a strong passion."

After graduating, Ahluwalia went back to

WORDS SIMON BROUGHTON
PHOTO GEORGE WHITESIDE

India to seriously study music eight hours a day with a strict teacher, Padma Talwalkar, in the time-honoured Indian way. "If you got something wrong, it's quite possible you'd get a slap, or something thrown at you," she says. "I'd close my eyes and get lost in the music and then I'd get a sudden shock as something hit me." Ahluwalia went back and forth between Canada and India for more than a decade.

In North America she worked as a touring manager for Putumayo artists and then decided to start singing professionally. She released records in Canada: *Kashish Attraction* in 2001 and *Beyond Boundaries* in 2003 (which won a JUNO Award, Canada's

Grammy); and then *Kiran Ahluwalia* (taking tracks from the previous two) got international attention in 2005. But it is last year's beautifully produced *Wanderlust* (World Connection/ Times Square) that is her first proper international release and responsible for the *Songlines Music Award*. It's soon to be released in India by Saregama.

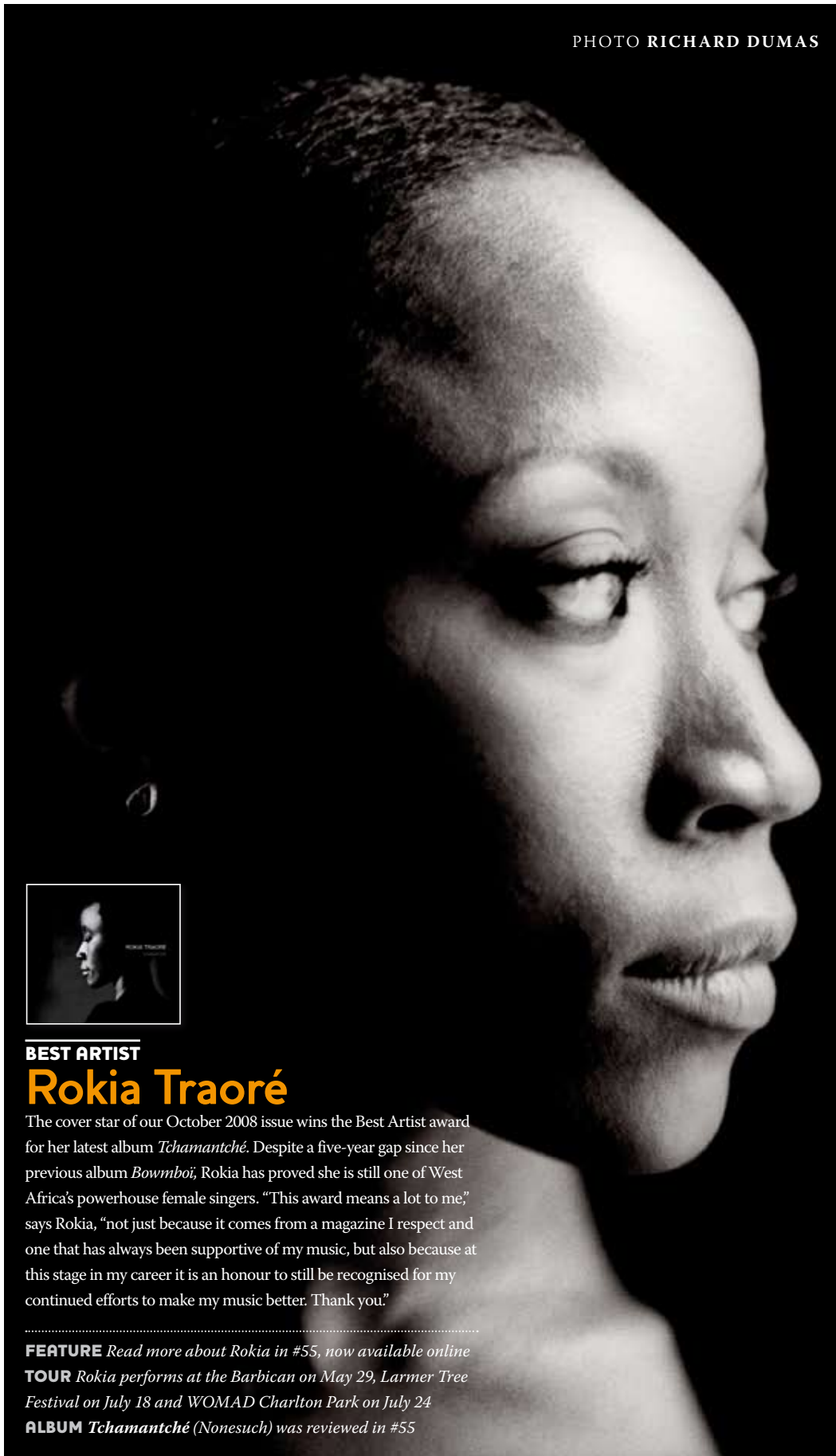
Ghazal music isn't particularly widely known in the West, but these romantic songs are hugely popular in North India and Pakistan – the form arrived, like the Mughals, from Persia and Central Asia. In India today they are heard continually in films and performed as popular and light-classical songs. Ahluwalia sings in Urdu

and Punjabi and, whether performing old poetry or contemporary lyrics, she gives them a new twist. "My music is a representation of my personality and my character," she adds. "Beyond my birth in India and growing up in Canada and now living in New York, I'm a person of the world and the world is there to influence me – whether it's Portuguese *fado* or trancey African grooves. I don't only sing traditional songs, I want to create a new genre."

TOUR Kiran Ahluwalia will be touring in Europe later this year

ALBUM *Wanderlust* (World Connection) was reviewed in #54 >>

PHOTO RICHARD DUMAS



BEST ARTIST

Rokia Traoré

The cover star of our October 2008 issue wins the Best Artist award for her latest album *Tchamantché*. Despite a five-year gap since her previous album *Bowmboi*, Rokia has proved she is still one of West Africa's powerhouse female singers. "This award means a lot to me," says Rokia, "not just because it comes from a magazine I respect and one that has always been supportive of my music, but also because at this stage in my career it is an honour to still be recognised for my continued efforts to make my music better. Thank you."

FEATURE Read more about Rokia in #55, now available online

TOUR Rokia performs at the Barbican on May 29, Larmer Tree Festival on July 18 and WOMAD Charlton Park on July 24

ALBUM *Tchamantché* (Nonesuch) was reviewed in #55



CROSS-CULTURAL COLLABORATION

Jah Wobble & The Chinese Dub Orchestra

"I've won? I've never won anything in my life!" Jah Wobble, the man who fronts the Chinese Dub Orchestra, has just been told his project has won the *Songlines* Cross-Cultural Collaboration award, and it's fair to say that this has been one of the better weeks in his life. We were supposed to meet four days earlier, but a Spurs victory over Chelsea had given him such a buzz, he had phoned up on his way back from the game. "I'm too happy right now, I won't be able to speak any sense."

The man born John Wardle (then rechristened with his professional name by Sid Vicious) has been making sense of the music industry for 30 years. Some might remember him as the bassist with John Lydon's Public Image Ltd. Others will have first come across him when he was a favourite at early WOMADs with the Invaders of the Heart, a group that had Justin Adams, Natacha Atlas, Sinéad O'Connor and a cast of dozens more pass through its ranks.

If that was a commercial highpoint, it also made him realise he had to take control of his own career. "The corporate world was doing my head in. I had an album that sold 80,000 and made £750,000 profit, but then the record company issued an edict that every album must make £3m in its first six months." So he jumped ship, starting his own label, 30 Hertz (that's one less than a low B, bass fans), now home to more than 25 releases, taking in English roots, Laotian dub and the great Uzbek singer Yulduz.

"I got a lot of stick from people saying I was going to destroy myself," Wobble says with a little relish. "But technology was driving the break-even point down to 4-5,000 copies, and once you've six or more releases, you've got a catalogue and a steady stream of income."

It's his most recent project that has garnered some of the best reviews of his career, however: The Chinese Dub Orchestra album, which was showcased at last summer's festivals and concert halls. If you saw the tour, with its funk, fire, fancy costumes and the incredible 'mask-changing dancers,' then you are unlikely to have forgotten the experience. If you didn't, YouTube is your friend.

Win Albums

We have three sets of each of the winners' latest albums up for grabs. To enter, simply answer the following question: What is the name of Jah Wobble's record label?

See p5 for *Songlines* competition rules and address. Closing date June 26 2009

WORDS DAVID HUTCHEON
PHOTO MARK MCNULTY

The first steps were somewhat prosaic and domestic. Wobble's wife, Zi Lan Liao, plays the *guzheng* (zither) and *yanqin* (dulcimer), and their sons are in the Pagoda Youth Orchestra in Liverpool. "I hate working with the missus," the bassist admits. "It's the only time we argue. I kept saying that I loved particular tunes, that I could do something with them, but she and the boys kept saying, 'You can't do that.' Yes, I can, it's only music."

Though immersed in Cantonese music via his in-laws, Wobble kept coming up against a brick wall: "They patronise Europeans a bit, think we're barbarians and that they're much more advanced. They've got 5,000 years of cooking culture, and they know what is Chinese music and what isn't. And they hate the cod-Chinese stuff. So it had to be true to them, and

they don't understand why we like to repeat stuff to get a groove going. It was a challenge."

Initially, the couple were planning to work up one or two tracks for a show with the Youth Orchestra as part of Liverpool's spell as European Capital of Culture in 2008. Yet the reaction was such that more grants were forthcoming and the project spiralled. They travelled to Chengdu and Beijing and found singers Gu Yinji and Wang Jinqi, plus so many dancers the touring party numbered 20. A logistical nightmare, but an artistic triumph.

Wobble has a habit of constantly moving forward, never repeating himself – but surely the response to Chinese Dub has been encouraging enough to make him consider another tour? He pauses for reflection. "The happiest times for me

are when I begin a project, and I've got this crazy [Gustav] Mahler thing I've just started. Massive strings, insane, with a funky dubby modulating bassline. But if some bright spark wants to book five festivals around the same time and do a budget bringing in the musicians and paying them properly, then fine."

"Anyway, I've got my autobiography coming out and I've just done a Radio 4 documentary on Sid Vicious. Now I want to relax, listen to some other people's music and catch up on reading. It's a lovely life and I'm a lucky geezer." That's what a Spurs win will do to you. ●

ALBUM *Chinese Dub* (30 Hertz Records)
was reviewed in #57