

Habib Koité

Ocean Wed 13

Music journalists, what do they know? If you didn't read *Time Out* and bought a copy of the latest REM album because some other magazine raved about it, you are probably disinclined to believe anything a rock critic says ever again. Which is good, because the press release for Habib Koité's new album, 'Baro' (Putumayo) quotes some scribe as saying the Malian guitarist is 'The African Clapton'. In which case, Cesaria Evora is the African Celine Dion. Class A shite, of course, but it saves having to think or upset an artist who would love to garner the same amount of attention as every corset-wearing, hair-weave-denying, rhino's-crotch-skinned western artist.

Here's the deal, then: Koité plays a beautiful acoustic guitar over simple, affecting melodies and complicated rhythms; if he is to be compared to anybody, he is a male Rokia Traoré, a Malian pop star who sells zilch at home because he isn't traditional enough. Which is West Africa's loss and our



gain, because you don't have to attend evening classes at SOAS to understand and adore what he is doing. His voice reeks class, too (if you are just skimming and need a reference to decide whether to go to the gig, Seal wouldn't be a million miles away vocally, but the music really is good). Oh yes, and as a songwriter, he's the Malian Cole Porter. He's great then, though not even he could get rid of the stench from the REM album in my room. *David Hutcheon*