

# Globe



***The African queen  
Legacy winner Katie  
Fahrland in Mali***



## Dancing to the rhythm of life

**Legacy winner Katie Fahrland fulfilled a lifetime ambition when she travelled to Mali to take part in the festival *Sur le Niger in Segou***

FOR years, I dreamed of travelling to Mali. I devoured every morsel of Mali I could find at home: books, films, articles, and most of all albums and concerts by Malian musicians such as Ali Farka Touré, Bassekou Kouyaté, Afel Boucoum, Amadou and Mariam, and Tinariwen, all representing the country's rich musical tradition.

Thanks to the Globetrotters' William Wood Legacy Award, I realised my dream and travelled to Mali for the Festival sur le Niger in Segou in February. My adventures began amid the chaos at the bus station in

the capital city of Bamako, where I caught the bus to Segou. I noticed a building with two doors, one marked *hommes* and the other *femmes*, so I decided to use the toilet before the long bus journey.

I walked past the fruit seller camped in front and into the door marked *femmes*. I lingered on the threshold as I tried to make sense of the small square room in front of me, which was empty save for the mats on the floor and a woman sitting in the corner staring at me like I had three heads. The awkward moment was broken when I

heard yelling from the outside, "Hey! What are you doing in there? Get out!"

I stepped back and realised that in between *hommes* and *femmes*, written in large block letters was *MOSQUÉE*. I had walked into the mosque by accident! "I thought it was the toilets," I embarrassingly explained to my shocked audience.

The fruit seller and her entourage broke out in peals of laughter. "The toilet is over there!" I could hear their chuckles carrying on behind me as I sheepishly walked to the toilet. This experience was a good initiation, because everything I did in Mali proved



*Katie loved the colourful and joyous spirit she discovered in Mali*

to be an adventure, not least riding the bus...

When the bus arrived, there was a mad rush on the door to get a seat. A massive funnel of people formed around the door and climbed over and around competing passengers to ascend the stairs and secure the best seat. I was close to the door and I tried to cram myself inside, but people kept slipping in from the sides and pushing in front of me.

A man behind me cajoled, "Go on, get in!" I replied, "I'm pushing!" to which he said, "You are not pushing hard enough!" Once on board, I had to manoeuvre through a wall of people to find a seat. Welcome to the Central Line, African style.

I was travelling to Ségou for the Festival Sur le Niger, now in its fourth year and growing to the size of 14,000 revellers from Mali, Europe, and the Americas. As the name describes, the festival is quite literally on the Niger: the stage is built on a barge floating on the river just off the shore.

During the day, there were a variety of activities, including a colourful pirogue race on the river and traditional Dogon dances featuring cowry-laden women dancing in graceful circles and costumed and masked men hidden under elaborate layers of straw and cloth.

The festival vibe was joyous and fluid, with a free exchange of smiles and hellos passing between neighbours in the audience.

The stage was in the water and a rickety set of bleachers had been erected on the slope leading down to the Niger River's sandy edge. Climbing into the bleachers was like entering a human jungle.

The typical developing world crowd scene prevailed, one of overwhelming activity and uncoordinated movement that constantly seems on the brink of imminent disaster but proves to be surprisingly sustainable, like some infinite arcade game of Frogger where the frog manages to cross the busy road repeatedly but never gets hit.

Children of all ages crawled over and through the stands, emerging periodically from underneath me; women in impossibly flimsy heels navigated the wobbly bleachers and the uneven concrete blocks that served as steps; people pushed chairs about to work a path in and out; a pole protruding from the middle of the bleachers swayed in the wind, clinking against another unbolted pole.

A baby was asleep on the floor, wrapped up in blankets, oblivious to all the people stepping over and around him; and next to me was a woman with her baby who, after breast feeding from his mother, peed on the floor near my feet.

Somehow, it all worked.

As night fell and they prepared the main stage for the big acts, I walked onto the quay to watch the sun set over the Niger. The sun coloured the river a soft orange, and in the dusk the pirogues stood out like black silhouettes cut from paper and set gliding across the still water. Inside the festival the atmosphere was picking up.

I soon found myself dancing barefoot on the sandy banks of the Niger under a starry sky to the sounds of Managala Camara and Habib Koité. The crowd was wild and quick to take to their feet once the music picked up. Unlike back home, where it takes people a bit of drink and courage to get on the dance floor, the sober Muslim crowd at Ségou would hop up and burst into movement in one big swell as soon as the beats dropped.

And it wasn't just the youth – a group of big-bodied middle-aged women were the first ones to jump up and shake their booty to the fast rhythms, plopping down in the sand just as quickly afterward.

The dignitaries attending the festival, who were sitting in a row of chairs behind the crowd, would get a view of the dancing women's behinds blocking the stage. They started to yell, "Sit down!" and throw pebbles at the dancers. But no one cared and everyone kept dancing. This included several young Tuareg men, whose turbans

had started to come undone from dancing so hard and splashing about at the river's edge. The star dancer show was a muscular man in a bright yellow T-shirt, who decided to dance in the water, right below the stage, and strip down to his underpants. Nobody cared about all the craziness.

... until Habib Koité fell off the stage and into the water, while playing the electric guitar! Now that was finally something to cause a stir in the crowd. Somehow, Habib managed to land gracefully on his feet in the water and a stage hand speedily moved to unplug the guitar.

Habib just went on playing, walking through the water toward the audience. Everyone at the front started cheering, "Habib! Habib!" and rushing toward him. A trio of security guards came running fast along the water's edge, pushing everyone out of the way. The crowd surged and swayed to further screams of "Haaaabiib!" as they escorted him back on stage.

He took his soaked trousers off, and within a few minutes he was back on stage, playing in his underwear. Welcome to Africa!



*Can you direct me towards Mali? Katie gets herself some wheels*



# Globe

## Write for Globe

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