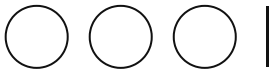


State Department 'extreme vetting' says no to traveling musicians



Leah Garchik

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Hawa Kasse Mady Diabete performs with the Kronos Quartet in 2018
Evan Neff / With permission to The Chronicle 2018

Kronos Festival 2019 was at SFJazz over the weekend, but it went on without Hawa Kassé Mady Diabaté, a singer who was to have come from Mali to perform with the group. A work by Diabaté was played by the quartet and sung by the San Francisco Girls Chorus, but due to “extreme vetting,” as mandated by the current administration, the composer-performer couldn’t be there to enjoy the response.

When Diabaté performed with Kronos in the spring of 2018, “she had a visa for a year,” said Kronos managing director Janet Cowperthwaite, “which is typical.” Since then, that P-3 visa, for “Artist or Entertainer Coming to Be Part of a Culturally Unique Program,” had expired. In January, Kronos started applying for a new one, said Cowperthwaite. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services had approved an authorization for her work, but this time, officials at the American Embassy in Bamako informed her on May 20, when she went to be interviewed, that she would be subject to “extreme vetting.” That was the day Kronos realized, too, that there was a problem. “We received a first note, saying everything was fine,” said Cowperthwaite, “everything was good. Then, three hours later, it was wait a minute, they had sent this DS-5535,” the “extreme vetting” form.

Kronos has worked with many musicians from around the world over the years, and Cowperthwaite said she was surprised at this roadblock. “I knew that there could be a problem with the visa, because it’s been an increasing situation for artists, but this particular situation is surprising — that they subjected her to that form, the ‘extreme vetting.’ It’s pretty amazing, what they wish for people to provide.”

The State Department form, “Supplemental Questions for Visa Applicants,” asks applicants to list every place visited outside their own countries for the past 15 years — for musicians, that may be a lot of places — including details about specific locations within those countries, specific dates those places were visited, and source of funds. Also, 15 years of past employment details must be provided, as well as “your unique user name for any websites or applications you have used to create or share content (photos, videos, status updates, etc.) as part of a public profile within the last five years.”

Lawyer Matthew Covey, a specialist in this field, had procured visas before for Trio da Kali, a griot band with which Diabaté sings. “His firm managed the whole process for us,” said Cowperthwaite. “You can do it yourself directly, but it’s a very specialized field, so when we do get visas for artists, we use them.”

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The typical visa takes something like 10 days to clear. In this case, specialists have found that the introduction of the DS-5535 form typically extends that time frame to six or seven months. London-based musicologist Lucy Duran, who works with Kronos, the Trio and other African musicians, said that Bassekou Kouyaté, a musician from Mali who has performed with Taj Mahal, has been in the U.S. dozens of times since the 1990s. For a proposed trip this year, a DS-5535 form was issued to him in January. He has not yet been cleared. Among the other musicians for which the State Department has required DS-5535s are performers from Mali, Nigeria, Mauritania and Somalia.

- In a parking lot at the Menlo Park Trader Joe's, polite Becky Preimesberger and the polite woman standing next to her car traded you-go-first offers, an exchange that ended with the woman explaining, "No, you go ahead. ... I am waiting for my kids to get their lives together." Preimesberger listened for sounds of fighting emanating from the car, and heard nothing. "Maybe there was some form of meditation going on?" she speculated.

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- In the bike lane on 17th Street near Potrero, Dan Kirshner rode over “what looked like a piece of cardboard but turned out to be a thin sheet of bubble wrap with a brown-paper facing. Very satisfying!” Yes, he says, he could hear the bubbles pop. “Can the rest of the bike lanes be outfitted this way?” I’m envisioning one of those family entertainment “museums” — similar to the ones about color and ice cream — featuring sitting, rolling around, jumping and poking among its bubble-popping opportunities.

PUBLIC EAVESDROPPING

“Honey, I love your father’s nose. I’m just glad it’s on his face and not yours.”

Mother to daughter, overheard at the Mountain Play on Mount Tam by Jack Irving