



of the *djinns*, or spirits, believed to inhabit the Niger river and as a boy was captivated by the traditional music played at village ceremonies to summon them. He made his first instrument, a one-string guitar known as a *djerke* at the age of 12, graduating to a borrowed six-string instrument in 1956. After years spent absorbing a vast repertoire of traditional music from different ethnic sources including Sonrai, Peul and Tamashek, it was not until 1968 that he first heard American music when a friend in Bamako played him imported records by James Brown, Albert King and John Lee Hooker. He always insisted he was not influenced by them; merely struck by the similarities of blues and funk rhythms to West African music.

By the 70s, he had moved to Bamako, where he spent a decade working as an engineer for Radio Mali and recording regularly acoustic guitar recitals for the station. The best of these early recordings were later compiled on *Radio Mali* (World Circuit, 1996). Although the recording techniques are rudimentary, the tracks possess an undeniable power and in 1975, he sent tapes of them to the Son Afric label in Paris. A few months later his first recording appeared in France on vinyl LP. Over the next few years, the label released six more LPs, all recorded in Bamako. The original albums are now hard to find, but two of them, recorded in the early 80s, were later released as the two CD set *Red & Green* (World Circuit, 2004).

Yet by the 80s, Ali had virtually retired from professional music, returning to Niafunké to farm his land. It was only after

he was famously tracked down by World Circuit's Anne Hunt that he was persuaded in 1987 to play his first concerts outside Africa since a solitary appearance at a festival in Bulgaria in 1968.

While in London, he cut his first album to be recorded outside Mali. Although still sounding raw and earthy, *Ali Farka Touré* (1988) benefitted hugely from Nick Gold's simple but sensitive production. It was followed by *The River* (1990), which found him rocking out on electric guitar on more than half the tracks and sounding harder-edged and bluesier than ever before. *The Source* (1992) was another advance, recorded with a full band and including two fine duets with the American bluesman Taj Mahal,



With fellow Malian Toumani Diabaté and below, Ali letting rip on stage



TANGO ANGELINO

recorded backstage in a dressing room in Norwich, of all improbable locations.

These recordings gave Gold the idea of taking Ali to the US to record an album of guitar duets with Ry Cooder. The result was the Grammy-winning *Talking Timbuktu* (1994). After that, he became increasingly reluctant to leave his farm on the banks of the River Niger and there were just two more solo albums. To make *Niafunké* (1999), Gold had to travel with a mobile studio and generator to record in Ali's village. It's a hugely atmospheric recording, although its reputation has suffered – probably unfairly – by being sandwiched between his two undisputed masterpieces in

Talking Timbuktu and *Savane*. At the same productive sessions at the Hotel Mande, Bamako that produced *Savane*, Ali also recorded *In The Heart Of The Moon* (2006), a beautiful album of guitar-*kora* duets with Toumani Diabaté. A second album of duets recorded with Diabaté in London in the summer of 2005 should be released by World Circuit some time in 2007. ●

You can hear excerpts from three of our recommended albums, *Savane*, *In The Heart of the Moon* & *The Source*, on this issue's podcast

ALI FARKA TOURÉ

The late, great Malian blues guitarist by Nigel Williamson

Recorded shortly before his death, Ali Farka Touré's final release *Savane* took him to new heights of critical acclaim. "Absolutely perfect – a truly great piece of work," was the judgement of Ry Cooder and it's impossible to find a single voice raised in disagreement. The album not only topped *Songlines'* albums of the year but also nestled alongside Bob Dylan and the Arctic Monkeys in the lists in rock magazines *Mojo* and *Uncut*, the latter's reviews editor taking time out from his unwavering passion for the White Stripes to rave about Ali's 'instinctual and wonderfully entrancing' music. *Savane* even made the pop charts

(admittedly its 30-something peak would have disappointed U2 but it was still higher than any African record since Ladysmith Black Mambazo were catapulted into the top 20 by a baked beans commercial). What's more, it would be a major surprise if further posthumous recognition does not await in 2007 at the BBC Radio 3 awards for world music and the Grammys. The perfect time, then, for an overview of the rich and deep well of music that led up to *Savane*.

Born in the village of Kanau on the banks of the River Niger in north-west Mali in 1939, when still a boy he moved down the river to Niafunké, where he lived on-and-off for the rest of his life. A devout Muslim, he also had a profound belief in the power

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BEST...

...ALBUMS



***Savane* (World Circuit, 2006)**
The last is the one to buy first. Justifiably sub-titled 'The King of the Desert Blues Singers' in a homage to the classic Robert Johnson LP, it's an album of such profound depths that it really sounds as if his entire career was spent ramping up to this masterpiece.



***In The Heart Of The Moon* (World Circuit, 2005)**
Wonderfully fluid and spontaneous-sounding duets between Ali's acoustic guitar and Toumani Diabaté's rippling *kora* with contributions from Cooder and Cuban bass player Orlando 'Cachaíto' Lopez added later.



***Talking Timbuktu* (World Circuit, 1994)**
Ali hated LA and the Hollywood studio in which the album was recorded. But he and Cooder emerged with an album of intuitive guitar magic that will be the subject of a Classic Album feature in a future issue of *Songlines*.



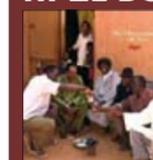
***The Source* (World Circuit, 1992)**
The first album on which we really heard him let rip on electric guitar and with a bigger band, although there are some fine acoustic tracks too. Taj Mahal and Nitin Sawhney make fine cameo appearances.

...AVOIDED



***Radio Mali* (World Circuit, 1996)**
Actually, there's nothing by Touré that really should be avoided. But these recordings made for Mali's national radio in the early 70s for obvious reasons lack the hi-tech studio quality of his later CDs. Nevertheless, the performances offer a master class in traditional Malian acoustic styles and include all four tracks from his first (and now extremely rare) vinyl LP, released in 1975.

LIKE ALI FARKA TOURÉ, THEN TRY... AFEL BOCOUM



***Niger* (Contre-Jour, 2006)**
Touré's long-time protégé is a fine singer and guitarist in his own right in both acoustic and electric styles, as his second album proves. It opens with a tribute to his mentor on which he laments, 'My life's best friend is gone.'



MICHEL DE BOCK