



Festival of the desert

Jasper Winn experiences music beyond Timbuktu when he visits the Festival in the Desert in Mali, West Africa

When it comes to remoteness, isn't Timbuktu pretty much the gold standard for being far-flung, off the map and generally a long way from anywhere? So, how remote does that make the Festival in the Desert at Essakane? Because Essakane is at least half a day's onward jeep travel into the Sahara from the already proverbially remote Timbuktu. Well apparently, it makes it the 'remotest music festival in the world.' And I'm sure it is... at least for several hundred of us foreigners.

Once actually in Essakane of course, we find ourselves hugely outnumbered by locals for whom Glastonbury would be obviously far, far remoter than this, their own local knees-up. Essakane consists of a scratchy scribbling of acacia trees amongst drifts of soft, creamy sand. It's austere, achingly beautiful. And bloody hot. Lighting gantries and banks of speakers make up the biggest stage to have ever – OK, I'm guessing here – been erected so deep into the Sahara. Lines of low, goatskin tents provide shade. There's also the world's remotest bar. With ice! And there are several thousand Malians ready to party.

Most of them are Touareg, here for a traditional *témakannit*, a Saharan-style eisteddfod of song, dance, swordplay and camel racing. The Touareg – mostly desert traders and stock raisers – don't live easily within modern African nationhood. Raiding

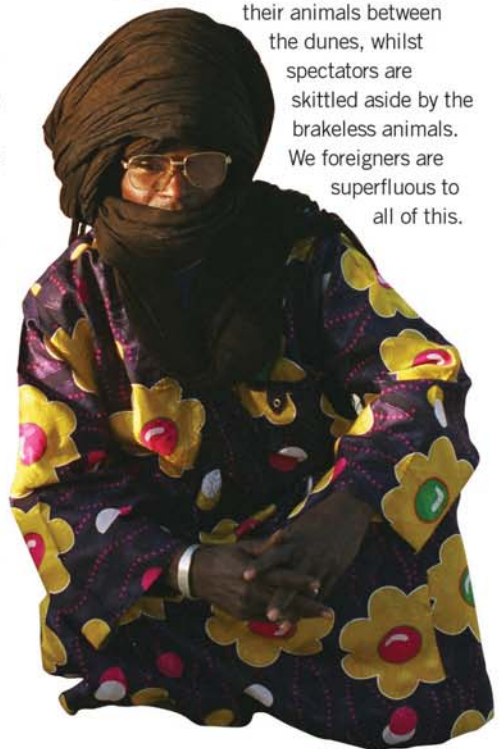
and armed rebellion were still commonplace until recently, and less than a decade ago Touareg insurgents, wielding swords and Kalashnikovs, laid siege to Timbuktu. But now there's peace, and we're at the Festival of the Desert to prove it.

After the smaller first and second festivals, also organised by the Belgian Slinks festival and the French band Lo'Jo, this third hooley is set to actually earn its 'international' appellation. The Minister of Culture has arrived from Bamako to ribbon-cut, and a constellation of Malian music stars are on the three-day bill, amongst them Oumou Sangaré, Ali Farka Touré and Lobi Traoré. More, an eclectic clutch of musicians from the wider world are here too. Thus Robert Plant and Justin Adams with their not-exactly-Led-Zep band, Italy's Ludovico Einaudi, the Navajo grunge thrashers Blackfire and Lo'Jo themselves all get to add 'Beyond Timbuktu 2003' to their tour itinerary T-shirts.

From the moment of arrival the festival is a genuinely surreal experience. In front of the stage are 200 Touareg warriors, lifted two metres above us mere bipeds on their stilt-legged camels. The men have broadswords at their waists, and wear robes with the dazzling colours of migraine flashes. Thunderclouds of indigo turbaning envelope their heads. Eyes are, for preference, hidden behind 70s-style aviator sunglasses.

From the stage there is the sonorous, bouncing thuddery of a large *tindé* drum,

walloped by the two women sitting astride its tensioning poles. Girls are singing and clapping out measured desert-travel rhythms. Haira Arby, the 'Nightingale of the North', who was first recorded and broadcast on Andy Kershaw's *Now That's What I Call Mali* radio programme, goes on to sing. Other camel riders, legs and arms flailing, begin racing their animals between the dunes, whilst spectators are skittled aside by the brakeless animals. We foreigners are superfluous to all of this.





ALL PHOTOS BY: René Gailfion

SONGLINES NOTES

- ◉ The fourth Festival in the Desert will be held in Essakane, near Timbuktu between January 9 and 11, 2004.
- ◉ For updated information (in English) check www.sfinks.be and www.festival-au-desert.org
- ◉ Touareg Tours in Mali (www.touaregtours.com) arrange travel packages. These range from the basic (flight, transfers, camping, three daily meals and water, plus festival ticket), to 'deluxe' tours (with hotels and tours to Dogon Country, Djenne etc, though you'll still be camping and eating very simple meals at the festival itself).
- ◉ If you're thinking of DIY-ing your trip you need to factor in flight costs (Point Afrique (www.point-afrique.com) are cheap but commensurately unreliable; Air France (www.airfrance.com) is a more dependable alternative), internal transport, buying and carrying all food and water, sourcing camping kit and festival entrance fee.
- ◉ A CD from the Festival in the Desert 2003 including tracks by Tartit Ensemble, Oumou Sangaré, Robert Plant and Justin Adams, Lo'Jo and many more artists is due for release in the UK this autumn. Details available from Lo'Jo (www.lojo.org). Tinariwen's CD, *The Radio Tisdas Sessions*, is available on Wayward Records.

bootlegged rap cassettes, leap around the stage front in ecstasy. Most Touareg, though, look bemused. By all criteria, far, far better, and less hubristic too, are Robert Plant's mandolin-driven 'Girl from the North Country',

and a version of 'Whole Lotta Love'. But Lobi Traoré is the genuine 'outsider' showstopper. His Bamana blues guitar-style and his punchy band, bring the audience to its collective sandals and keeps them there to stomp and shuffle-dance along. And the quintessential Essakane act? The group Tinariwen. They're a bunch of seven tough, but still idealistic, ex-rebels, who learnt to handle both guns and guitars in Libyan refugee camps in the early 80s. Over a decade, in between periods of desert-launched insurgency, they became leaders in developing the *ishumar* music style, with its

traditional camel-lope rhythms and bitter lyrics of protest and desires for self-determination, overlaid by brightly staccato bursts of electric guitar. Tonight, in front of a home crowd they should be scorchers, but for old time's sake they've let an old rebel buddy on stage to bash along on a spare drum kit. Musically this is a poor idea. But as part of what the festival is all about, it's absolutely, and genuinely, fine. Ali Farka Touré is the final act. He's the crowd pleaser for many *toubabs*. (white people). Most of the Touareg, though, began slipping away as soon as the Niger *ishumar* band Tarbiat had finished playing. Farka Touré finishes; his radio guitar feed allowing him to stroll, whilst playing, back to his jeep leaving an Ali-free stage still pouring forth music. Immediately the lines of 4WDs start loading up with *toubabs* before hurtling off into the desert and towards Timbuktu. A few others and I are less rushed; at the remotest bar in the world drinks are being discounted in line with falling demand. █

That is until the theatrical arsonists from the French Compagnie Carabosse lope off into the dunes with flaming brands to set light to hundreds of fire pots. Suddenly, Essakane transmutes into an infinite beach party peopled by Jedi, Woodstock hippies, faux explorers and medieval knights.

The festival leaves impressions rather than a chronological recall of events. The Touareg Tartit ensemble led by Fadimata Walet Oumar, are the highlight act, filling a flickering darkness with the call-and-response of strong matriarchs' voices, then looping wild ululations over a men's chorusing of chanted 'heh heh huh huhs' before dropping into low, erotically repetitious and breathy hissings.

Tidawt, who have driven over from Agadez in Niger, gathered around a twig fire in the dunes. With an acoustic nylon-string, and an electric guitar plugged into a tiny battery amp, they sing intense extemporised vocal duellings back and forth.

And weird? The Navajo trio Blackfire are the über-surreal act. The Benally siblings launch into serious-miened, guitar-twisting protest rock. Local youngsters who've already learnt "Yo! Musserfahker" greetings from

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The Touareg group, Tartit; Tarbiat from Niger; Justin Adams (on mandolin) and Robert Plant performing 'Girl from the North Country' and a colourfully dressed Touareg