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Mauritanian *chanteuse* Aïcha Bint Chighaly and musicians, at left. Right, Timbuktu's Haira Arby welcomes visitors to her tent.

FESTIVAL IN THE DESERT • ESSAKANE, MALI (CONTINUED FROM PAGE 43)

genuine participation in another culture. At each day's performance, the audience was surrounded by Tamasheks mounted on camels, watching the show from the crest of the dunes forming our theater.

Then on to the music. The group Awza opened the concert portion of the evening in true desert style: traditional stringed instruments, chanting and ululation accompanied by hand-claps and sword dancing.

Haira Arby, our tent neighbor and a truly classy lady, followed with her large ensemble; Haira is a Touareg/Arabic/Sorei *chanteuse* whose rootsy sound is enhanced by electric guitar and bass. She was also accompanied by *njarka* (Arabic bowed fiddle), trap drums and her own hand percussion. Her male dancers gave us a first sample of the graceful undulation of south Saharan dance.

Haira's band was followed by Takoumbawt, an ensemble whose name means "many villages." Tamashek tradition was honored again with simple hypnotic music, performed by musicians seated on the stage floor while sword dancers heightened the drama. Django, a sweet-voiced singer-guitarist who plays kora as well, slowed the pace a bit.

Then, as true Saharan night descended, temperatures dropped and stars began to blaze, three young Native Americans headed for their instruments—electric guitar, bass and drum kit. As artificial smoke filled the air, our Tamashek friends were treated to their own first taste of the exotic: Navajo punk rock with a message. This was the Jones Benally family, (two brothers and their sister, an awesome bass player), also known as the Alter-Native band Blackfire. Almost immediately the largely Tamashek audience responded with jubilation.

In 30 seconds or so, the audience was on its feet ...Tamashek, European, American...all dancing and cheering. As the young singer said to the audience between songs, "This is our first visit to your land. We can see that our landscape and culture have many similarities to yours. Desert to desert!" Everyone got that message.

A few songs into their set, the Blackfire youth invited their father, a traditional Navajo medicine man, onto the stage to chant with them. The tall gaunt figure in traditional Southwestern garb had been attracting attention as he walked the site during the day; when he and his children performed their ancient ceremonial chant, the response was empathetic respect.

That was one unexpected high point in a festival that offered an

embarrassment of riches. Later, Oumou Sangaré appeared, as warm and gracious in her performance as always. Although she hails from the southern Wassoulou area of Mali, Oumou is revered throughout the country for her musicianship, her support of women, and her regal persona. Her presence validated the cultural significance of the festival to all Malians. Ali Farka Touré, whose home region we were visiting, made his first cameo appearance during Oumou's set, showing off his graceful dancing skills.

Other fine acts followed, but I have to confess that we enjoyed some of this gorgeous music from the relative warmth of our tent...we knew in advance that the nights would be cold, but still the frigid temperatures came as a shock.

The second day dawned as brilliantly as the first. Because the site was so spacious, there were opportunities for congenial small gatherings. Musicians and festival attendees mingled comfortably, and because so many nations were represented, language barriers were only a minor problem. There was always someone who spoke French or English.

We had tea with our tent neighbor Haira Arby's hospitable band, and enjoyed a visit with Lobi Traoré. Lobi is a favorite of mine, a powerful guitar player and singer with an electric but distinctly Northern sound. He projects a tough-guy, urban image, but is one of the kindest people I've met. We also spent some time with the Navajo Jones Benally family, who were scheduled to perform a "traditional" set that evening, consisting of ancient healing dance and chant.

The second evening's concert continued the established momentum. Lo Jo, the Belgian band that was instrumental in organizing and administering the festival, performed a fine set. Their dedication to music and intercultural exchange deserve accolades from all who attended the festival.

The band Tidawt, from Niger, brought their addictive sound and sinuous dance to the stage. I found myself particularly attracted to the groups representing this (to me) unfamiliar land. Repetitive hypnotic melody lines and simple instruments combine with ebullient dancers to create a genre much greater than its components.

The Jones Benally family followed, demonstrating the traditional aspect of their repertoire. In symbolic costumes, they drummed, chanted and

Tdanced a series of healing ceremonies. Particularly effective was the father of the family dancing with a series of hoops which he looped over his body one by one—a true athletic feat as well as a rarely performed ceremony for healing the sick.

Next came Tinariwen, one of the strongest bands in a succession of fine music. The band hails from Kidal, Mali, and their fiery guitar driven ensemble gives contemporary credence to ancient desert music. They have already received recognition in Europe. Again, the audience was up and grooving.

Tinariwen was followed by Afel Bocoum, a singer guitarist and protégé of Ali Farka Touré. Afel's mellow voice and lush, bluesy guitar made a perfect conclusion to a long desert night.

Our third day in the desert began with a yelp from my tent-mate, who had been bitten by a scorpion. With vague memories of travel stories read ages ago, I somehow managed to locate and squash the little creature, and carry it off to the medical truck which was perhaps half a mile away.

Dashing over the dunes, disheveled and panicked, I came upon a couple of Touareg men enjoying their first morning tea over their campfire. My French and theirs was limited, but I showed them the scorpion corpse, and managed to convey our need for medical assistance. They scoffed at the idea of a doctor, and introduced me to a local marabout instead. With two Touaregs and the black-clad marabout in tow, we rushed to the aid of my suffering friend. The marabout turned out to be a true expert. He crushed the scorpion corpse over the victim's wound, then sucked out the venom. My friend recovered quickly, but got lots of sympathetic attention that day.

We were fortunate to have some time with Ali Farka Touré that afternoon. He disclaimed any role as organizer or inspiration for the festival, but his support and enthusiasm were obvious. Ali Farka had been a frequent presence on the festival stage, making videos and showing off his awesome dancing style. He is particularly adept at *takamba*, a traditional Tamashek/Songhai dance that gives men the showier role. The appearance of Ali Farka, wearing the traditional headwrap, a winter jacket and a brilliant smile, enhanced many artists' sets.

Ali Farka has severely restricted his international touring in recent years, dedicating himself instead to his family, his farm and community. He now records from the studio he built in his hometown of Niafunke, about 180 kilometers from Timbuktu. At a small press conference, Ali was asked about the civil war which ravaged the Touareg people until three years ago.

Speaking in French with an English interpreter, Ali Farka said, "There was no war. It was a misunderstanding. Our tribes are like a family of brothers...We solved the problem within the family. A family is like a

mouth—when the tongue and the teeth hurt each other, both must still remain in the mouth."

A man who enjoys parable and simile, he had this to say regarding the near-cliché connection between the music of northern Mali and American blues: "American blues are like the branches and leaves of a tree; the roots are in Africa." Our appetites were whetted for Ali's performance that evening, the festival's finale.

A camel race preceded the evening's musical events. We became very fond of these mild-mannered beasts, who seemed to be treated kindly by their owners and were almost as exquisitely embellished. We were told that each camel learns to come to its master in response to a particular song.

Again the evening's concert opened with superb traditional groups. Then, at 7:30 came an event much anticipated by the baby-boomers among us—Robert Plant, of Led Zeppelin fame/notoriety, performed a brief set with guitarist Justin Adams. Hearing Bob Dylan's "Girl from the North Country" and Zeppelin's own "Whole Lotta Love" in the context of a Saharan music festival was, for me, a curiosity, not a thrill. Our Touareg friends in the audience seemed to agree. While Plant and Co. sounded fine, they certainly did not generate the excitement or leap the cultural boundaries that the Navajo rock band Blackfire had.

Nabi, an ensemble from Ali Farka's hometown, Niafunke, led us back to the traditional groove with rich instrumentals and contagious energy. They were followed by Tarbiat, another guitar-fueled ensemble from Niger, who provided more of the potent rhythms, exotic melodies and serpentine movement that made their country's music so appealing.

The festival's organizers had arranged attendees' transportation from the site by 4x4s to begin at 2 a.m., shortly after the concert's finale. So some of the evening's most interesting performers had sets that felt rushed.

Lobi Traoré was accorded only a four-song, half-hour set. He crammed full intensity into the short time allotted. Lobi flailed his guitar into almost surrealistic realms, barely grounded in the desert sand by his consummate band. Lobi has one of the best bass players around, with awesome *balafon* and *djembe* musicians fanning the flames. Some of my favorite Lobi songs are among the more laid-back in his repertoire—the ones he brings on at 2:30 or 3 o'clock in a Bamako night club. But this was Lobi's night for maximum impact. He is loved in Mali, seems to have friends everywhere here, and deserves wider recognition.

The act who followed, Takamba Super 11, take their name from the traditional Tamashek-Songhai dance and the irresistible music that accompanies it. It's courtship music, in which the men play the more

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Left, members of the Touareg ensemble Tartit in their tent; at right, the great Malian bluesman Ali Farka Touré.



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