

## FESTIVAL IN THE DESERT • ESSAKANE, MALI (CONTINUED FROM PAGE 45)

graceful and seductive part. The men undulate across the stage in richly exotic garb and outrageous headpieces or turbans, their arms tracing elegant shapes in the desert air. The women, in jeweled "crowns" covered by large veils, sway and wave their arms in response. A space was cleared in the sand and the audience was invited to dance along. Great fun, and everyone looks good performing takamba.

The festival's finale was by Ali Farka Touré, the area's most beloved musical ambassador. The time spent assembling his musicians and tuning instruments seemed frustratingly slow, since departure times had been so carefully orchestrated. But once the music began, all was forgiven. Ali Farka was accompanied by artists from several other festival bands, notably Afel Bocoum, his close neighbor in Niafunke, on guitar and vocals. To watch Ali Farka's guitar technique was a revelation. He

seemed barely to brush his fingers across the strings of his acoustic instrument, but the sound that emerged was voluptuous, deliberate yet seemingly effortless. As he played, the stage gradually filled with dancers until the musicians were nearly obscured. By the time the last note evaporated into the night, Ali Farka was gone.

It was time to emerge from a three-day fantasy and begin the mundane rituals of departure. A procession of white 4x4s carried weary but sated adventurers off to the real world. If all goes well, many of us will be back next year for the fourth edition.

*Susan Cummings Maroni is a freelance writer based in Dakar, Senegal. Thanks to Sean Barlow, producer of "Afropop Worldwide," and Banning Eyre, Webmaster of [afropop.org](http://afropop.org), for contributing photos for this story.*

PHOTO BY SEAN BARLOW

The lavishly attired Touaregs were a constant, friendly presence, astride their slim, gentle camels.



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