



## **ALI FARKA TOURE**

### **BIOGRAPHY**

**By Lucy Duran**

The River Niger is the great artery that flows through the Savannah and the desert of Mali; a shimmering piece of silver where life seems to go on unchanged, as it has done for centuries. Travelling by boat to Niafunké, Ali's home town in the north west of the country, there's a sense of timelessness. Long narrow pirogues glide past, riding low in the water, heavy with fishing nets, trading goods and passengers, the boatmen poling their way in the shallows between islands of low bush and yellow grasses. On either side, the Sahel extends out in an endless scorched horizon of sand, rock, steppe and scrubland. Hazy blue skies yellow and red earth, grey mud-brick villages, black rocks are dotted with patches of brilliant green fields painstakingly irrigated by local farmers. Ali Farka Touré is one of these farmers and this is the landscape of his music.

The Niger has a life of its own. At the height of the dry season it shrinks down to a snake like curl between wide sandy banks that measure up to half a mile or more. During the rainy season the placid waters flood the plains, forming lakes that can rage like the ocean. The once silent river suddenly comes alive with howling winds and torrential storms, bringing the much needed rain with vengeance, covering the banks with a temporary coat of emerald grass.

To get to Niafunké where Ali lives with his family and farmlands, you either travel by car in the dry season or, for short periods of the year, by steamer from Koulikoro, east of Bamako. During the slow and arduous drive in the sweltering dry heat the scrubland landscape is intermittently interrupted by the hazy sight of a tiny village or, on the horizon, a huge herd of cattle. After the rains the steamer stops at the beautiful river towns of Djenne and Mopti, chugging past the majestic mud brick mosques with their wedding-cake turrets and creamy surfaces, past the flotilla of pirogues painted with red, white, blue and green abstract designs, past young girls washing clothes on the banks, past the market women selling pottery, fruit and vegetables, past the fishermen casting nets... The muezzin's call to prayer drifts downstream. It's an unhurried journey, time to reflect on the strength, diversity, and natural rhythm of local culture, in which Ali's music is so firmly rooted.

Ali was born in 1939 in the village of Kanau near Gourmararouse on the banks of the River Niger in the north west of Mali. He was his mother's tenth son but the first to survive infancy. "I lost nine brothers of the same mother and father. The name I was given was Ali Ibrahim, but it's a custom in Africa to give a child a strange nickname if you have had other children that have died." The nickname they chose for Ali was 'Farka' meaning donkey, an animal admired for its strength and tenacity. "But let me make one thing clear" he says, "I'm the donkey that nobody climbs on!"

When Ali was still an infant his father died while serving in the French army, and the family moved south along the river to their present home, Niafunké.

With a population of over twenty thousand, Niafunké is one of the larger villages which scatter this sparse, arid semi-desert region. The lack of electricity and the fact that they have only recently installed telephone lines contributes to the tranquil atmosphere and there is always the cooling breeze from the river. People make their living by farming, cattle herding and fishing, and a great deal of work is spent irrigating the land. Toure enjoys life there where he lives a peaceful existence with his wife and eleven children.

Niafunké revolves around the trade generated by the quay, which wakes up from its usual sleepiness whenever the steamer pulls in, springing to the frenzied pitch with the shouts of traders, hawkers and travellers. As the steamer departs, the monotony of life in a small Sahelian town settles back in. Music is mostly performed at weddings, child naming ceremonies and circumcision parties, held in the open courtyards and wide sandy streets, with musicians playing a variety of graceful dance styles like the Takamba and Touareg Hekkam. Music is also heard on radio and cassette but the preference here is still for these local musics. Mostly though, life in Niafunké is taken up with the arduous business of farming the land.

Ali is Niafunké's most famous citizen. Although internationally known as a musician he regards himself as a farmer. In Mali, although music is prized above anything else it is largely the monopoly of castes of hereditary musicians, whose special role for centuries has been to perform the praises and genealogies of noble families and to recite noble deeds and proverbs. Ali comes from a noble background. There is no tradition of music in his family, but he had a calling early on in life, becoming drawn to music by its power. He was a 'child of the river'.

In Niafunké, as in the most of Mali, the dominant religion is Islam and Ali is a devout Muslim. But in this part of the world Islam co-exists with a much older indigenous belief system connected with the mysterious power of the Niger. It is believed that under the water there is a whole world of spirits called Ghimbala – male and female djinns with their own character, history, symbolic colours and ritual objects, all vividly portrayed in the local mythology. These djinns control both the spiritual and temporal world. When things go wrong – as they inevitably do in this harsh, unpredictable climate – if there are unexplained illnesses or sudden natural disasters, then people get together to hold spirit ceremonies, in which music and dance are the central activity. Through the power of music the spirits may possess those present, and this is considered an auspicious sign. Those who have the gift to communicate with the spirits are called "children of the river".

Ali had no formal schooling and his childhood was taken up by farming, followed by an apprenticeship as a tailor. But he was also mesmerised by the music played at spirit ceremonies in the villages along the banks of the Niger. He would sit and listen in awe as musicians sang and played the favoured instruments of the spirits; djerkel single string guitar, njarka single string violin and ngoni four string lute. His family did not regard music as a worthy occupation and the boy's interest was not encouraged. He was, however, a fiercely independent and self-determined youth and at the age of twelve he fashioned his

first instrument, a djerkel guitar (which many years later he presented to Ry Cooder as a gift.)

Ali found it very easy and natural to learn to play. Early on however he suffered attacks caused by his contact with the spirit world. He was sent away to be cured, and when he returned he quickly became recognised for his power to communicate with the spirits. Ali was greatly influenced by his grandmother Kounandi Samba who was famous in the area as a priestess of the Ghimbala. But after her death, he was dissuaded from becoming a priest. "Because of Islam, I don't want to practise this type of thing too much.....these spirits can be good to you or bad, so I just sing about them, but it's our culture, we can't pass it by." Many of his songs are about the spirits and he always travels with his njarka violin as well as recordings of spirit music which he listens to whenever possible.

As a teenager Ali found work as a taxi driver and car mechanic and he also spent some time as a river ambulance pilot. He travelled widely in these jobs and continued to play music in ceremonies and for pleasure, with small groups and as accompanist to singers. By his early twenties he had learnt seven Malian languages fluently and had mastered the ngonni (traditional four string lute), njarka violin and Peul bamboo flute. He was also well on his way to absorbing a vast repertoire of music and legend from the various masters he encountered on his travels.

" I got to know music and to love it through so many heroes who passed on and who continue to live on the earth, because history remains. So it gave me the opportunity to get to know the culture of this music, it's biography, legend and history."

Ali is Sonrai, a people who form the majority of the population of Niafunké, but there are also many other peoples in the region speaking numerous languages – Peul (the language of the Fulani nomadic pastoralists), Bozo, Bambara, Dogon, Songoy, Zarma and Tamasheq, the language of the Touareg. Toure sings in all these languages but the majority of his repertoire is in Sonrai and Peul.

In 1956 during his travels Ali saw a performance by the National Ballet of Guinea featuring the great Malinke guitarist Keita Fodeba. "That's when I swore I would become a guitarist, I didn't know his guitar but I liked it a lot. I felt I had as much music as him and that I could translate it." He began to play using borrowed guitars and found it easy to translate his traditional guitar technique to the Western instrument. At about the same time, he added percussion, drums and accordion to his musical skills (even making a few appearances performing Charles Aznavour repertoire!)

Upon Mali gaining independence from the French in 1960 the new government under President Modibo Keita initiated a policy to promote the arts and cultural troupes were formed to represent each of Mali's six administrative regions. From 1962 Ali worked with the Niafunke district troupe. He composed, sang, played guitar and rehearsed singers and dancers in a troupe numbering a hundred and seventeen people. He was extremely proud of the troupe which was successful in the biannual competitions held in Mopti throughout the 1960's. Ali also won numerous athletic prizes. "I did this so my village wouldn't win zero. I'm very patriotic!"

In 1968 (the year Modibo Keita was ousted in a coup by Moussa Traore) Ali made his first trip outside Africa when he was selected (along with guitarists Kelitigui Diabate and

Djelimadi Tounkara) to represent Mali at an international festival of the arts in Sofia, Bulgaria. They performed arrangements of traditional music with Ali on guitar, flute, djerkel and njarka. It was in Sofia on 21<sup>st</sup> April 1968 that he bought his first guitar.

In 1970 Ali's work took him from Niafunké to Mopti and later in the year to the capital Bamako. Here he began a decade working for National Radio Mali as an engineer. He also played as part of Radio Mali's orchestra until it was disbanded in 1973. In the 1960's Touré had become known as a great traditional musician through his broadcasts on Radio Mali playing flute and ngoni. Throughout the 1970's he brought his unique guitar style to the attention of the country in further broadcasts. On the advice of a journalist friend he sent a number of recordings of these broadcasts to the Son Afric record company in Paris.

In a matter of months the first Ali Farka Touré album (amongst the very first commercial records of Malian music) was released. All four of the songs on that album are included in this collection. He continued to record in Bamako and send the tapes to Paris and a total of seven albums were released. The first five of these are now extremely rare.

The 1970's were a period of intense musical activity in Mali with a rich mixture of musical styles coming together for the first time in Bamako. First there was the wealth of Mali's own diverse musical traditions; and then there were foreign styles that were making an impact on local dance orchestras. The major influences on Mali at the time were dance music from Cuba, rumba from Zaire, the guitar styles from neighbouring Guinea and the music of African American singers like James Brown, Otis Redding and Aretha Franklin. Ali is still a great fan of all of these – partly as he says because he hears so much of his own traditions in them.

Of all this music, the one which struck him as most similar to his own, was the blues. In 1968 a student friend in Bamako played him records by James Brown, Jimmy Smith, Albert King and John Lee Hooker. He was immediately struck by the thought that "this music has been taken from here". In Hooker's music especially he heard echoes of Tamasheq music. Recordings of Otis Redding and John Lee Hooker are still very popular in Niafunké. Although Toure was very impressed by Hooker's music he says he was not influenced by it. More it served to confirm to him the value and international aspects of his own culture.

Throughout the 1970's Ali established a formidable reputation in Mali as a unique solo artist. He pioneered the adaptation of Sonrai, Peul and Tamasheq styles to the guitar. Even today, few have followed his path. His charismatic persona, his fine voice and intricate flowing guitar technique, his good looks and enigmatic character, have all contributed to an almost cult following. He remains uncompromisingly wedded to his traditional music, refusing to "go commercial". His songs celebrate love, friendship, peace, the land, the spirits, the river and Mali; all expressed in dense metaphors.

In 1980 Ali returned to Niafunké where he settled and began work on his farmlands and home. Now known as the 'Red' album, the sixth of Ali's releases on Son Afric found popularity in London, and prompted Ann Hunt from World Circuit to go to Mali and invite Ali to Europe. In 1987, for the first time since the Sofia Festival in 1968, Touré travelled alone from Mali to play his first concerts outside Africa. Showing no signs of nerves or unfamiliarity with his surroundings, and with absolute and supreme confidence in his music, he played a masterful series of shows winning audiences everywhere. In the same

year his first recording outside Africa was an instant success for the World Circuit label. Since then he has undertaken extensive tours of Europe, U.S.A, Canada and Japan and has recorded a further four albums for the label, including 'The River', 'The Source', and the Grammy Award winning 'Talking Timbuktu', a collaboration with Ry Cooder which served to confirm Ali's status as an artist of international repute. In 1996, World Circuit released 'Radio Mali', a collection of tracks taken from the first five albums that Ali recorded for the Son Afric label. This album features some of Ali's finest acoustic performances; and in 2004 World Circuit release the remaining two albums from this series, known as the 'Red & Green' albums they have been digitally re-mastered and re-released in their entirety. Although his recent recordings have been made with more advanced technology and he has collaborated with international artists such as Cooder and Taj Mahal, these early recordings, recorded says Touré, "when I was an absolute fool for the guitar," have a power and ambiance of their own.

Despite his amazing international success, Ali became increasingly reluctant to leave his farm in Niafunké. World Circuit's Nick Gold decided that the only way to make another record with him was to bring the studio to Niafunké. The studio was set up in an abandoned agricultural school, and the recording had to be fitted in between tending the land, with the crops always coming first. The resulting album 'Niafunké' was released in 1999.

Since then, Ali returned to what he sees as his main role in life, looking after his farm and being with his family. Ali has been actively involved with ongoing projects to better the agricultural situation in the Niafunké region, this culminated in his recent appointment as mayor. As a member of the Union for the Republic and Democracy (U.R.D.); under the basic tenets of 'unity, employment, and justice', this is a position of enormous prestige and importance in the region, and is a responsibility that Ali takes very seriously.

Although choosing to retire from music as his full time career, and rarely playing live, Ali has stated that should he feel suitably inspired, or have an issue that needs to be addressed he will record again. In 2003, he participated in the documentary 'Feel Like Going Home'; directed by Martin Scorsese, the film traces the history of the blues from the banks of the Niger to the Mississippi Delta, and would bring Ali to an even wider audience, with his enigmatic personality shining through. Ali has also been researching his local music and culture, with the aim of preserving it for future generations, and this has prompted him to once again work with World Circuit.

In 2004 Ali made his first new recordings in over five years, to be released in 2005 on World Circuit. These recordings are part of a trilogy of albums recorded by World Circuit at sessions in the Mandé Hotel in Bamako, Mali. The first release from these sessions will be a duet album from Ali and Toumani Diabaté called 'In the Heart of the Moon'. Scheduled for release in Autumn 2005 is an album by Toumani's extraordinary Symmetric Orchestra. The third album is Ali's new solo album, recorded with his unique downhome n'goni (traditional Malian guitar) band "that's as formidable as any in Africa" The Independent.

Ali began 2005 with his first concert in Europe for five years, his show at the BOZAR in Brussels, which featured a guest appearance from Toumani Diabaté, was greeted with frenzied excitement from fans and press alike. To co-incide with the release of their duets album Ali and Toumani have lined up some additional live dates in Europe. The n'goni

band will back Ali at these concerts with a line-up that includes Mama Sissoko and Bassekou Kouyate on n'goni, Ali Magassa on guitar, Souleymane Kané on calabash, and Oumar Hamadoun Toure on congas . As well featuring old favourites, these concerts will showcase material from both Ali's new solo album and the duets album with Toumani. Reports of these historic recordings and concerts have resulted in the forthcoming trilogy being the most eagerly awaited African releases in many years,

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