



## **ALI FARKA TOURE**

### **BIOGRAPHY**

**1939 - 2006**

Ali was born in 1939 in the village of Kanau 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 said, "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 Niafunké, the village Ali called home for the rest of his life.

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.

Ali was Niafunké's most famous citizen. Although internationally known as a musician he regarded himself as a farmer. In Mali, music is largely the monopoly of castes of hereditary musicians, but Ali came from a noble background. There is no tradition of music in his family, but he had a calling early on in life, becoming he said "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 was 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 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. 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 Ghimbala 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 ngonon 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.

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 a neighbouring village to be cured, and when he returned a year later 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 travelled with his njarka violin as well as recordings of spirit music which he listened 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 ngon (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, its biography, legends and history."

Ali was 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, Bambara, Dogon, Songoy, Zarma and Tamasheq, the language of the Touareg. Touré sang in all these languages but the majority of his repertoire was 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. He said that his only problem was in keeping all six strings happy by touching them as he was used to only playing the monochord. At about the same time, he added percussion, drums (he made his own kit complete with cymbals and bass drum) 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 Niafunké 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 the sixties he also accompanied various singers and he had his own small group, a recording of which from 1963 includes a song sung in Sonrai to a Cuban salsa rhythm.

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 the revered musicians Kelitigui Diabaté 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.

Also in 1968 a student friend in Bamako played him records by James Brown, Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett, Jimmy Smith and Albert King. Ali remained a great fan of all these, partly he said because he heard 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 especially as performed by John Lee Hooker. He was immediately

struck by the thought that “this music has been taken from here” and was surprised to hear singing in English.

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 a sound engineer. He also played as part of Radio Mali’s orchestra until it was disbanded in 1973. Throughout the 1970’s he brought his unique guitar style to the attention of the country via many radio 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) featuring Ali on guitar and vocals and Nassourou Sarre on ngoni was released. He continued to record in Bamako and send the tapes to Paris and a total of seven albums were released. Selections from these albums have been released on the ‘Radio Mali’ CD.

Throughout the 1970’s Ali established a formidable reputation in Mali as a unique solo artist. He pioneered and perfected the adaptation of Sonrai, Peul and Tamascheq styles to the guitar. He remained 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 1986 one of his Radio Mali recorded albums (re-released on World Circuit as part of Red and Green in 2004), started to generate great interest amongst radio d.j.’s in London including Andy Kershaw and Charlie Gillett. It also came to the attention of Folk Roots magazine; with no information on the record sleeve the journal puzzled over this African musician who played the blues in such an individual way.

Anne Hunt from World Circuit travelled to Bamako to seek out this mysterious man. With the help of Toumani Diabate a broadcast was made on Radio Mali asking Ali to present himself. Ali had moved back to Niafunké four years earlier but at the time of the broadcast was visiting the capital. An invitation was made for Ali to perform in the U.K. and in 1987 for the first time since the Sofia Festival in 1968, Touré he played 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, Brazil and Japan and has recorded a further five 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.

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.

After that, Ali returned to what he saw as his main role in life, looking after his farm and being with his family. Ali was actively involved with ongoing irrigation projects to better the agricultural situation in the Niafunké region and this culminated in his election in 2004 as Mayor of Niafunké.

Although choosing to retire from music as his full time career, and rarely playing live, Ali stated that should he feel suitably inspired, or have an issue that needs to be addressed he would 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. Ali had also been researching his local music and culture, with the aim of preserving it for future generations, and this had inspired him to play and record again. In 2004 after turning down endless lucrative offers to perform, Ali accepted an invitation to play at the tiny Privas festival in France for no fee. Ali began 2005 with his first major 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.

In 2005 the first of a trilogy of albums recorded at Bamako's Hotel Mandé was released. 'In the Heart of the Moon' a duet album with Toumani Diabaté won a GRAMMY award making Ali the only African to have received two such prestigious honours. Shortly following the album's release Ali played a series of brilliant European concerts with his unique down-home ngoni band featured on his new album, 'Savane' the third in the Hotel Mandé series.

Sadly, Ali would not see the release of 'Savane'. Just a few weeks after winning his second GRAMMY and approving the album's final master, Ali succumbed to the bone cancer with which he had suffered from for the preceding two years. He died on March 7<sup>th</sup> 2006.

In Mali he was awarded a posthumous medal of honour and given a state funeral attended by the President, government ministers, Mali's leading musicians and thousands of others. The worldwide media coverage of his death was unprecedented for an African musician and messages poured in from fans around the world.

Ali Farka Touré was a true original. An exceptional musician, he transposed the traditional music of his native north Mali and single-handedly brought the style known as desert blues to an international audience. He was a giant of African music and will be missed by fans throughout the world.

Original text by Lucy Duran  
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